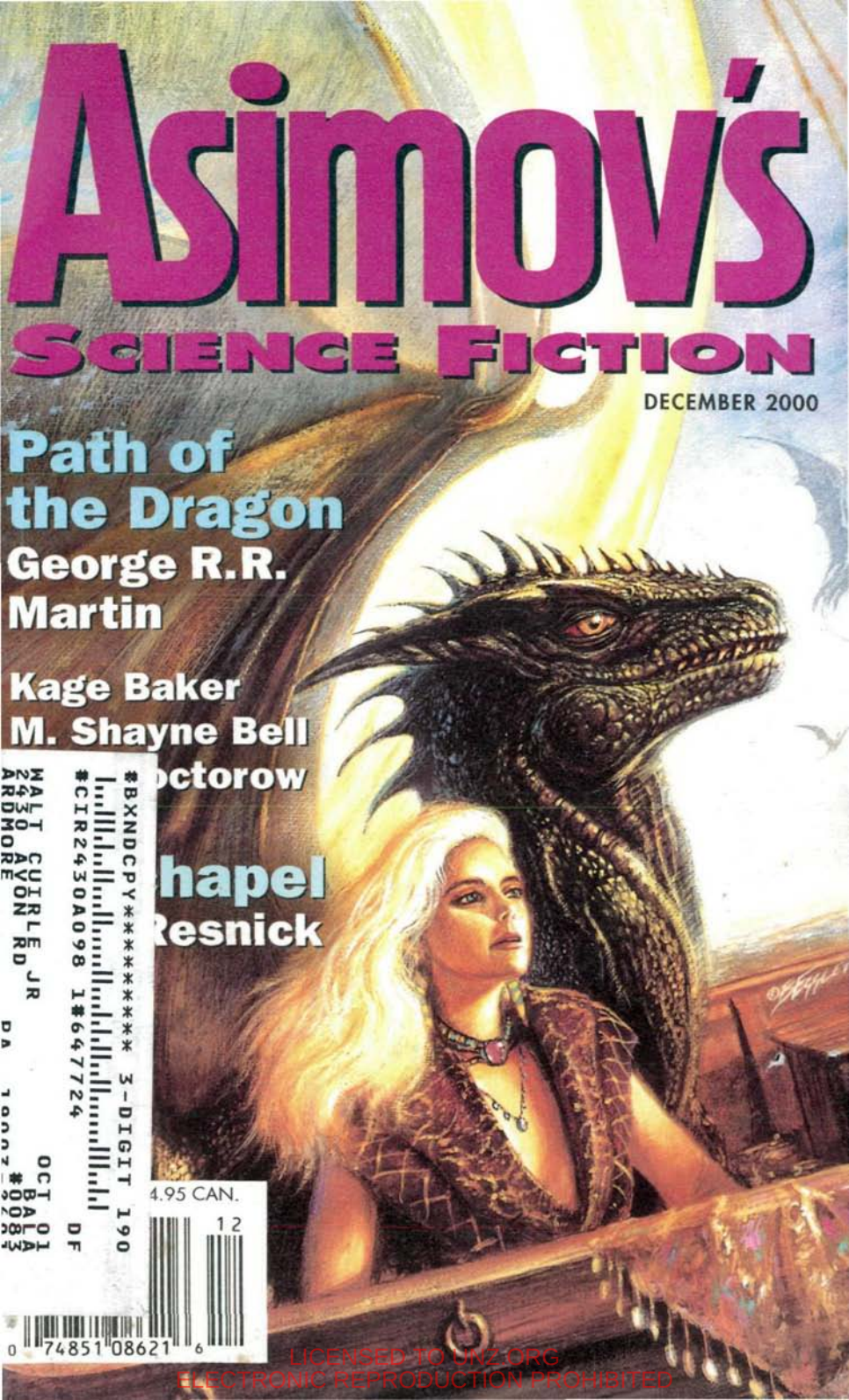

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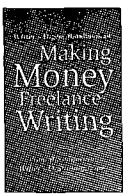

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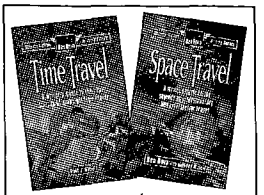

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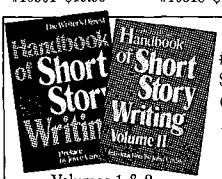

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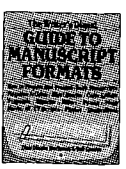

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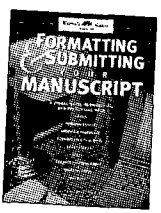

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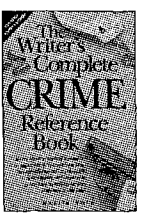

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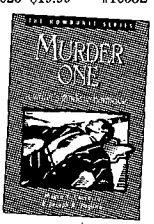

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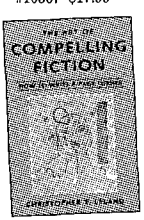

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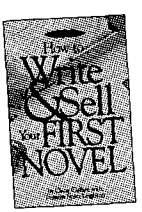

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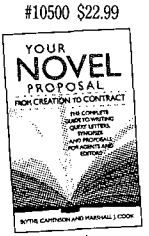

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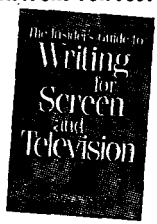

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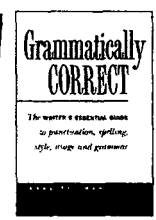

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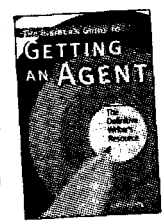

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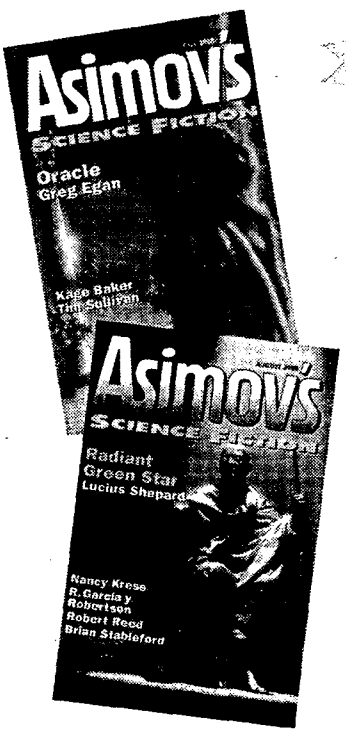

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

THE GRAND MASTERS

The newest winner of the Grand Master award of the Science Fiction Writers of America is Brian Aldiss, the great British writer whose illustrious array of books includes *Hothouse, Cryptozoic,* the magnificent Helliconia Trilogy, and a dozen or so volumes of dazzlingly innovative short stories. Aldiss joined the roster of Grand Masters at the annual awards banquet of SFWA in New York City in May.

The SFWA Grand Master award is one of the two highest distinctions our field confers—the other being the Guest of Honor designation at the World Science Fiction Convention, which I discussed in last issue's column. These awards recognize a lifetime of significant work, and anyone who wants to understand the history of science fiction in the twentieth century need only look at SFWA's list of Grand Masters.

It was Jerry Pournelle, when he was President of SFWA nearly thirty years ago, who dreamed up the idea of the Grand Master award. Since 1965 SFWA had been giving its Nebula trophy annually to the authors of the best novels and short fiction of the previous year. But Pournelle felt that the accomplishments of some of our greatest figures were being slighted, because they had done their outstanding work in the years prior to the Nebula's inception. So he proposed a special award—an oversized version of the handsome block of Lucite that is a Nebula—to be awarded by vote of SFWA's officers and past presidents in acknowledgment of the significant work those writers had done over the long term. And, to avoid cheapening the value of the award, Pournelle stipulated that it should be given no more often than six times every decade.

Pournelle's suggestion was eagerly accepted by the membership, and in 1975 the first Grand Master Nebula was given to Robert A. Heinlein, surely one of the defining figures of modern science fiction. Heinlein's recent work had come under attack by critics who found fault with it on literary and even on political grounds, but no one questioned the greatness of the man who had written *Methusaleh's Children, Double Star, The Moon is a Harsh Mistress,* and the Future History stories. (And, in fact, his career was far from over even in 1975: he would go on to produce such well-received novels as *Friday* and *The Cat Who Walks Through Walls* in the years following his receiving of the award.)

In those days nearly all the writers who had clustered around the great editor John W. Campbell of *Astounding Science Fiction* to create the so-called "golden age" period of the 1940s were still alive, and they were the obvious choices for grandmasterhood in the next few years. And so Jack Williamson, who had given us *The Legion of Space* back in the 1930s, and such golden-age Campbell-era classics as the Seetee and Humanoids books, became the second Grand Master in 1976. Clifford D. Simak, of *City* and *Way Station* fame, joined the group the following year.

Since the rules stipulated only six awards per decade, no Grand Mas-

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ter was chosen in 1978; but in 1979 another golden-age favorite, L. Sprague de Camp, he of *Lest Darkness Fall* and *The Incomplete Enchanter* and ever so much more, was honored. Another year was skipped, and then in 1980 Fritz Leiber *(Conjure Wife, The Wanderer, Gather, Darkness!)* was the pick.

Under the rules no further award could be given until 1984, when Andre Norton became the first female Grand Master (a designation that created certain grammatical problems that have never been adequately resolved) and also the first who had not been associated with the Campbell editorship.

You may be wondering, at this point, why the name of Isaac Asimov has not yet been included in the list. As it happened, Isaac was wondering the same thing, since he, too, had been a key member of the John Campbell team, and by the 1980s the name of "Asimov" was virtually synonymous with science fiction, as the very magazine you are reading now will testify. And so, in his good-naturedly self-promoting way, Isaac was given to observing, far and wide, that a certain conspicuous figure of the era had not yet been given his due. He said it playfully, of course, and made it clear that he was just joking—but in fact there was no small degree of seriousness beneath his clowning. He privately suspected that he was not going to live many more years, and he wanted to win that award before he died.

It is quite true that one of the considerations involved in nominating people for the award is an actuarial one. Even great writers don't live forever, and we have always tried to honor our oldest ones first. Heinlein and de Camp had been born in 1907, Williamson in 1908, Leiber in 1910, Norton in 1912, Simak all the way back in 1904. Isaac—born in

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1920—was a veritable youth by comparison. No one was aware in the 1980s of how quickly Isaac's health was weakening, though. So, despite his otherwise quite valid claim and all his yelps, he simply had to sit by and wait, even while his great friend and rival, Arthur C. Clarke (born 1917) carried off the 1986 trophy.

But of course a group of Grand Masters that did not include Isaac Asimov was plainly incomplete; and his torment came to an end in 1987 at a ceremony in New York. I went up to him afterward to congratulate him as he stood there cradling the trophy in his arms; and as I put out my hand he feigned a look of great alarm, as though I were trying to take it away from him, and cried, "You can't have it! You can't have it! You have to wait another fifteen years!"

Isaac was only sixty-seven when he finally won—still the youngest writer ever to be chosen, the only one so far to receive it before the age of seventy. (And he was only seventy-two when he died, five years after winning!) But the curious thing about factoring a calculation of the recipient's age into our choice of award-winners was that in the first decade of the award's existence, all the very senior figures to whom we gave the trophies went right on living and, in most cases, actively writing as well, after they received it. I remember Jerry Pournelle saying to me, somewhere around 1985, "We may be giving literal immortality to the winners."

Indeed, of the first six Grand Masters, three are still alive as I write this—Jack Williamson and Sprague de Camp, both past ninety, and Andre Norton, at eighty-eight. And that dear man Cliff Simak, though he did die eventually in his mid-eighties, managed the remarkable trick of winning a Nebula for his short story "The Grotto of the Dancing Deer" in 1981, the first time a Grand Master had won one of the annual trophies *after* joining the elect group. (Nor has anyone turned the trick since.)

But not everyone, alas, shared in the mysterious gift of longevity that the Grand Mastership seemed to confer. The name of Alfred Bester (*The Demolished Man, The Stars My Destination*) had frequently come up in preliminary discussions among the people who pick the winners, but each year some other writer's qualifications always seemed more urgent. So by the time Alfie actually was chosen for the trophy, in 1987, he was a very sick man, and he did not live to attend the 1988 ceremony at which it was awarded. Thus he became our only posthumous Grand Master.

Bester, at least, was still living when he was chosen, and had been informed before his death that he had won. The SFWA rules make it impossible for dead writers to be chosen, which is why Jules Verne and H.G. Wells and Aldous Huxley are not on the list—and, alas, such an unquestionable modern master as Theodore Sturgeon, whose death at the age of sixty-seven prematurely removed him from contention. Frank Herbert, who died at sixty-five, is another likely winner who didn't last long enough to make it. The same can be said of Philip K. Dick, dead at the age of fifty-four in 1982.

Ray Bradbury, though, took his place on the roster in 1989, and Lester del Rey, one of the two remaining survivors of the Campbell era, was the 1991 choice. (The other surviving golden-age figure, and a towering one indeed, was A.E. van Vogt. But the author of *The World of Null-A* and *Slan* was unaccountably kept waiting until 1996, when he was eighty-four years old and al-

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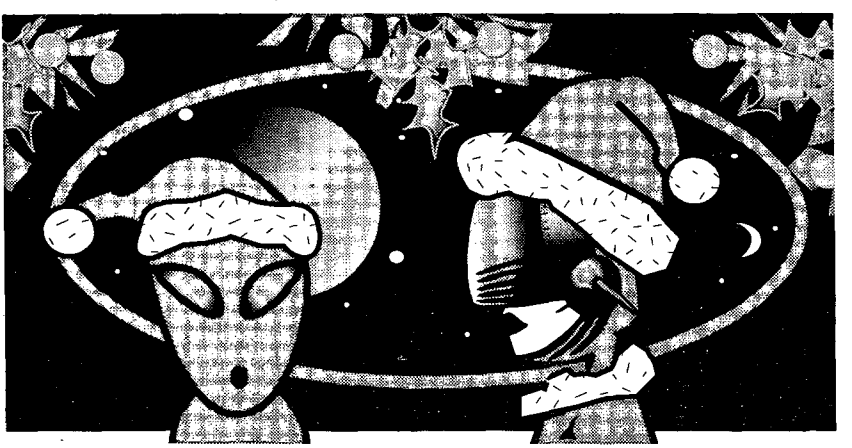
ready suffering from the onset of Alzheimer's disease. Van Vogt nevertheless attended the ceremony in person and—no doubt at tremendous personal effort—managed to deliver a creditable acceptance speech.)

The other Grand Masters chosen in the 1990s were men who made their marks in the postwar era, when John Campbell no longer was the dominant figure in the field. Frederik Pohl, whose remarkable career has brought him a bushel of awards both as author and editor, capped it with the Grand Master Nebula in 1993. The formidable critic, teacher, and short-story writer Damon Knight took the award home in 1995. Jack Vance, he of *The Dying Earth* and *Big Planet* and *The Dragon Masters,* was the 1997 winner, and Poul Anderson—*Three Hearts and Three Lions, Guardians of Time, The Boat of a Million Years,* and ever so many more—won in 1998. Last year's winner was Hal Clement, who earned his place in the archives with *Needle, Iceworld,* and *Mission of Gravity.*

Now Brian Aldiss takes his place on the roll of honor. You can certainly think of eight or ten other writers who belong on it, and so can I (though I won't name them here, because I'm one of the past presidents of SFWA who nominate and vote on the Grand Masters, and I think that everything concerning future choices should be kept under wraps until the winner is announced). It is an awesome list. In giving them our trophy, we do them honor, yes—but in fact it is this group of Grand Masters who honored us with their unforgettable stories, and we who love science fiction owe them not just plastic trophies but our eternal gratitude. O



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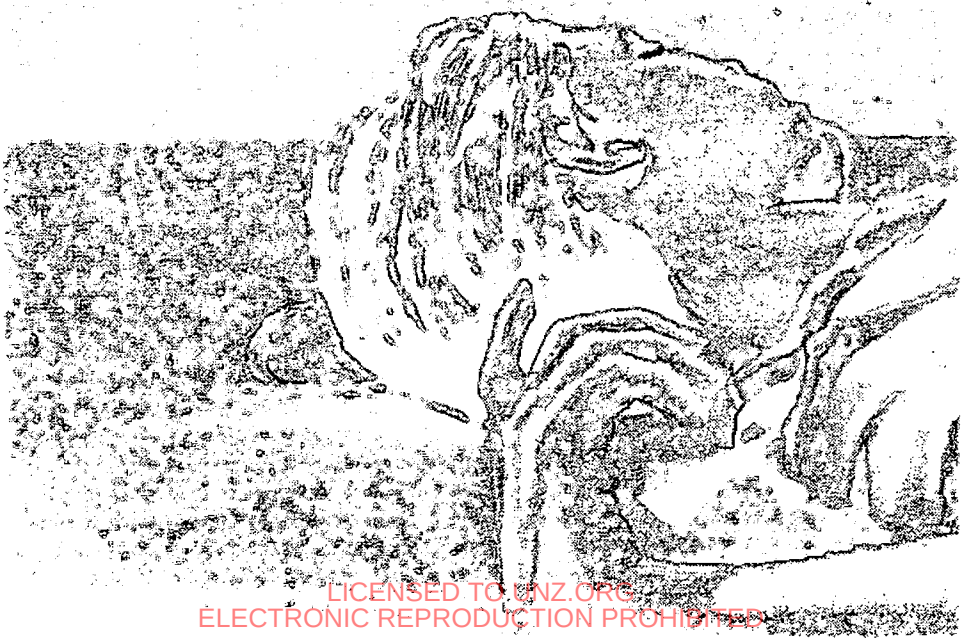
Kilimanjaro CHAPEL

Mike Resnick

Illustration by Steve Cavalieri

An alternate history in which Theodore Roosevelt, Esq., encounters the hideous fiend known only as Jack the Ripper



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Mike Resnick's last story for us was the novella, "Hunting the Snark" (December 1999). It won our Readers' Award Poll and is a current finalist for the Hugo award. Mr. Resnick is a multiple past winner of the Hugo and he recently won the 100,000-franc Prix Tour Eiffel. His latest novel, *The Outpost*, will be out from Tor next year. "Redchapel" is the author's fifth Teddy Roosevelt tale to appear in *Asimov's*.

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"From Hell, Mr. Lusk—
Sir, I send you half the Kidne I took from one woman,
prasarved it for you tother piece I fried and ate it was
very nise I may send you the bloody knif that too it out
if you only wate a whil longer
signed Catch me when yu can Mishter Lusk"

—Jack the Ripper
October 16, 1888

"I have not a particle of sympathy with the sentimentality —as I deem it, the mawkishness—which overflows with foolish pity for the criminal and cares not at all for the victim of the criminal."

—Theodore Roosevelt
Autobiography

The date was September 8, 1888

A hand reached out of the darkness and shook Roosevelt by the shoulder. He was on his feet in an instant. His right hand shot out, crunching against an unseen jaw, and sending his assailant crashing against a wall. He crouched low, peering into the shadows, trying to identify the man who was clambering slowly to his feet.

"What the devil happened?" muttered the man.

"My question precisely," said Roosevelt, reaching for his pistol and training it on the intruder. "Who are you and what are you doing in my room?"

A beam of moonlight glanced off the barrel of the gun.

"Don't shoot, Mr. Roosevelt!" said the man, holding up his hands. "It's me—John Hughes!"

Roosevelt lit a lamp, keeping the gun pointed at the small, dapper man. "You haven't told me what you're doing here."

"Besides losing a tooth?" said Hughes bitterly as he spit a tooth into his hand amid a spray of blood. "I need your help."

"What is this all about?" demanded Roosevelt, looking toward the door of his hotel room as if he expected one of Hughes' confederates to burst through it at any moment.

"Don't you remember?" said Hughes. "We spoke for more than an hour last night, after you addressed the Royal Ornithological Society."

"What has this got to do with birds?" said Roosevelt. "And you'd better come up with a good answer. I'm not a patient man when I'm rudely awakened in the middle of the night."

"You don't remember," said Hughes accusingly.

"Remember *what?*"

Hughes pulled out a badge and handed it to the American. "I am a captain of the London Metropolitan Police. After your speech we talked and you told me how you had single-handedly captured three armed killers in your Wild West."

Roosevelt nodded. "I remember."

"I was most favorably impressed," said Hughes.

"I hope you didn't wake me just to tell me that."

"No—but it was the fact that you have personally dealt with a trio of brutal killers that made me think—hope, actually—that you might be able to

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help me." Hughes paused awkwardly as the American continued to stare at him. "You *did* say that if I ever needed your assistance . . ."

"Did I say to request it in the middle of the night?" growled Roosevelt, finally putting his pistol back on his bedtable.

"Try to calm yourself. Then I'll explain."

"This is as calm as I get under these circumstances." Roosevelt took off his nightshirt, tossed it on the four-poster bed, then walked to an ornate mahogany armoire, pulled out a pair of pants and a neatly folded shirt, and began getting dressed. "Start explaining."

"There's something I want you to see."

"At this hour?" said Roosevelt suspiciously. "Where is it?"

"It's not far," said Hughes. "Perhaps a twenty-minute carriage ride away."

"What is it?"

"A body."

"And it couldn't wait until daylight?" asked Roosevelt.

Hughes shook his head. "If we don't have her in the morgue by daylight, there will be panic in the streets."

"I'm certainly glad you're not given to exaggeration," remarked Roosevelt sardonically.

"If anything," replied the small Englishman seriously, "that was an understatement."

"All right. Tell me about it."

"I would prefer that you saw it without any preconceptions."

"Except that it could cause a riot if seen in daylight."

"I said a panic, not a riot," answered Hughes, still without smiling.

Roosevelt buttoned his shirt and fiddled with his tie. "What time is it, anyway?"

"6:20 A.M.."

"The sun's not an early riser in London, is it?"

"Not at this time of year." Hughes shifted his weight awkwardly.

"Now what's the matter?"

"We have a crisis on our hands, Mr. Roosevelt. I realize that I have no legal right to enlist your help, but we are quite desperate."

"Enough hyperbole," muttered Roosevelt, slipping on his coat.

"You *really* hunted down those murderers in a blizzard?" said Hughes suddenly.

"The Winter of the Blue Snow," said Roosevelt, nodding his head briskly. "Doubtless exaggerated by every dime novelist in America."

"But you *did* bring them back, alone and unarmed," persisted the Englishman, as if Roosevelt's answer was the most important thing in his life.

"Yes . . . but I knew the territory, and I knew who and where the killers were. I don't know London, and I assume the identity of the killer you're after is unknown."

"So to speak."

"I don't understand," said Roosevelt, adjusting his hat in front of a mirror.

"We don't know who he is. All we know is that he calls himself Saucy Jack."

The two men approached the police line behind the Black Swan. The night fog had left the pavement damp, and there was a strong smell of human waste permeating the area. Chimneys spewed thick smoke into the dawn sky, and the sound of a horse's hooves and a cart's squeaking wheels could be heard in the distance.

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"Sir?" asked one of the constables, looking from Hughes to Roosevelt.

"It's all right, Jamison," said Hughes. "This is Theodore Roosevelt, a colleague from America. He is the man who brought Billy the Kid and Jesse James to justice."

Constable Jamison stepped aside immediately, staring at the young American in awe.

"Now, why did you say that, John?" asked Roosevelt in low tones.

"It will establish respect and obedience much faster than if I told him you were an expert on birds."

The American sighed. "I see your point." He paused. "Just what am I supposed to be looking at?"

"It's back here," said Hughes, leading him behind the building to an area that had been temporarily lit by flaming torches.

They stopped when they were about ten feet away. There was a mound beneath a blood-drenched blanket.

"Steel yourself, Mr. Roosevelt," said Hughes.

"After all the monographs I've written on taxidermy, I don't imagine you can show me anything that can shock me," answered Roosevelt.

He was wrong.

The blanket was pulled back, revealing what was left of a middle-aged woman. Her throat had been slit so deeply that she was almost decapitated. A bloody handkerchief around her neck seemed to be the only thing that stopped her head from rolling away.

Her belly was carved open, and her innards were pulled out and set on the ground just above her right shoulder. Various internal organs were mutilated, others were simply missing.

"What kind of creature could do something like this?" said Roosevelt, resisting the urge to retch.

"I was hoping you might be able to tell *us*," said Hughes.

Roosevelt tore his horrified gaze from the corpse and turned to Hughes. "What makes you think I've ever encountered anything like this before?"

"I don't know, of course," said Hughes. "But you *have* lived in America's untamed West. You have traveled among the aboriginal savages. You have rubbed shoulders with frontier cowboys and shootists. Americans are a simpler, more brutal people—barbaric, in ways—and I had hoped . . ."

"I take it you've never been to America."

"No, I haven't."

"Then I shall ignore the insult, and only point out that Americans are the boldest, bravest, most innovative people on the face of the Earth."

"I assure you I meant no offense," said Hughes quickly. "It's just that we are under enormous pressure to bring Saucy Jack to justice. I had hoped that you might bring some fresh insight, some different methology . . ."

"I'm not a detective," said Roosevelt, walking closer to the corpse. "There was never any question about the identities of the three killers I went after. As for *this* murder, there's not much I can tell you that you don't already know."

"Won't you try?" said Hughes, practically pleading.

Roosevelt squatted down next to the body. "She was killed from behind, of course. She probably never knew the murderer was there until she felt her jugular and windpipe being severed."

"Why from behind?"

"If I were trying to kill her from in front, I'd stab her in a straightforward

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way—it would give her less time to raise her hand to deflect the blade. But the throat was slit, not punctured. And it had to be the first wound, because otherwise she would have screamed and someone would have heard her."

"What makes you think someone didn't?"

Roosevelt pointed to the gaping hole in the woman's abdomen. "He wouldn't have had the leisure to do *that* unless he was sure no one had seen or heard the murder." The American stood up again. "But you know all that."

"Yes, we do," said Hughes. "Can you tell us anything we *don't* know?"

"Probably not. The only other obvious fact is that the killer had some knowledge of anatomy."

"This hardly looks like the work of a doctor, Mr. Roosevelt," said Hughes.

"I didn't say that it was. But it was done by someone who knew where the various internal organs belonged, or else he'd never have been able to remove them in the dark. Take a look. There's no subcutaneous fat on the ground, and he didn't waste his time mutilating muscle tissue."

"Interesting," said Hughes. "Now that *is* something we didn't know." He smiled. "I think we should be very grateful that you are a taxidermist as well as an ornithologist." He covered the corpse once more, then summoned another constable. "Have her taken to the morgue. Use the alleyways and discourage onlookers."

The constable saluted and gathered a team of policemen to move the body.

"I assume we're through here," said Roosevelt, grateful that he no longer had to stare at the corpse.

"Yes. Thank you for coming."

Roosevelt pulled his timepiece out of a vest pocket and opened it.

"No sense going back to sleep. Why don't you come back to the Savoy with me and I'll buy breakfast?"

"I've quite lost my appetite, but I will be happy to join you for a cup if tea and some conversation, Mr. Roosevelt."

"Call me Theodore." He shook his head. "Poor woman. I wonder who she was?"

Hughes pulled a notebook out of his pocket. "Her name was Annie Chapman. She was a Whitechapel prostitute."

"Whitechapel?"

"Whitechapel is the section of the city we are in."

Roosevelt looked around, truly seeing it for the first time, as the sun began burning away the fog. "I hope New York never has a slum like this!" he said devoutly.

"Wait until New York has been around as long as London, and it will have this and worse," Hughes assured him.

"Not if I have anything to say about it," said Roosevelt, his jaw jutting out pugnaciously as he looked up and down the street.

Hughes was surprised by the intensity of the young man's obvious belief in himself. As they stared at the broken and boarded windows, the drunks lying in doorways and on the street, the mangy dogs and spavined cats and fat, aggressive rats, the endless piles of excrement from cart horses, the Englishman found himself wondering what kind of man could view a woman's mutilated corpse with less distaste than he displayed toward surroundings that Hughes took for granted.

They climbed into Hughes' carriage, and the driver set off for the Savoy at a leisurely trot. Before long they were out of Whitechapel, and, Roosevelt noted, the air instantly seemed to smell fresher.

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Roosevelt had eaten the last of his eggs, and was concentrating on his coffee when an officer entered the dining room and approached Hughes.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, sir," he said apologetically, "but they said at the Yard that this is of the utmost urgency."

He handed a small envelope to Hughes, who opened it and briefly looked at what it contained.

"Thank you," said Hughes.

"Will there be anything else, sir?" asked the officer. "Any reply?"

"No, that will be all."

The officer saluted, and when he left Hughes turned back to Roosevelt.

"What are your plans now, Theodore?"

"I have two more speeches to give on ornithology," answered Roosevelt, "and one on naval warfare, and then I board the boat for home on Friday."

"Let me tell you something about the murder you saw today," began Hughes.

"Thank you for letting me finish my breakfast first," said Roosevelt wryly.

"We have a madman loose in Whitechapel, Theodore," continued Hughes.

"That much is obvious."

"We knew that before today," said Hughes.

Roosevelt looked up. "This wasn't his first victim?"

"It was at least his second." Hughes paused. "It's possible that he's killed as many as five women."

"How can he still be at large?"

"We can't watch every Whitechapel prostitute every minute of the day and night."

"He only kills prostitutes?"

"Thus far."

"Were they all this brutally mutilated?"

"The last one—a girl named Polly Nichols—was. The first three suffered less grievous damage, which is why we cannot be sure they were all killed by the same hand."

"Well, you've got your work cut out for you," said Roosevelt. "I certainly don't envy you." He paused. "Have you any suspects so far?"

Hughes frowned. "Not really."

"What does that mean?"

"Nothing."

Roosevelt shrugged. "As you wish. But the subject of Saucy Jack is closed. Either you confide in me or I can't help."

Hughes looked around the half-empty dining room, then lowered his voice. "All right," he said in little more than a whisper. "But what I tell you must go no farther than this table. It is for you and you alone."

Roosevelt stared at him with open curiosity. "All right," he said. "I can keep a secret as well as the next man."

"I hope so."

"You sound like you're about to name Queen Victoria."

"This is not a joking matter!" whispered Hughes angrily. "I am convinced that the man who has been implicated is innocent, but if word were to get out . . ."

Roosevelt waited patiently.

"There are rumors, undoubtedly spread about by anarchists, that are little short of sedition," continued Hughes. "Scandalous behavior within one's

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own class is one thing—but murders such as you witnessed this morning . . . I simply cannot believe it!" He paused, started to speak, then stopped. Finally he looked around the room to make certain no one was listening. "I can't give you his name, Theodore. Without proof, that would be tantamount to treason." He lowered his voice even more. "He is a member of the Royal Family!"

"Every family's got its black sheep," said Roosevelt with a shrug.

Hughes stared at him, aghast. "Don't you understand what I'm telling you?"

"You think royalty can't go berserk just as easily as common men?"

"It's unthinkable!" snapped Hughes. He quickly glanced around the room and lowered his voice again. "This is not Rome, and our Royals are not Caligula and Nero." He struggled to regain his composure. "You simply do not comprehend the gravity of what I am confiding in you. If even a hint that we were investigating this slander were to get out, the government would collapse overnight."

"Do you really think so?" asked Roosevelt.

"Absolutely." The small, dapper policeman stared at Roosevelt. "I would like to enlist your aid in uncovering the *real* murderer before these vile rumors reach a member of the force who cannot keep his mouth shut."

"I don't believe you were listening to me," said Roosevelt. "My ship leaves on Friday morning."

"Without you, I'm afraid."

Roosevelt frowned. "What are you talking about?"

Hughes handed the envelope he'd been given across the table to Roosevelt.

"What is this?" demanded Roosevelt, reaching for his glasses.

"A telegram from your President Cleveland, offering us your services in the hunt for the madman."

Roosevelt read the telegram twice, then crumpled it up in a powerful fist and hurled it to the floor.

"Grover Cleveland doesn't give a tinker's damn about your murderer!" he exploded.

Hughes looked nervously around the room, and gestured the American to keep his voice down.

"He just wants to keep me from campaigning for his Republican opponent!"

"Surely you will not disobey the request of your president!"

"I can if I choose to!" thundered Roosevelt. "He's my president, not my king, a difference that I gather was lost on you when you manipulated him into sending this!" He glowered at the telegram that lay on the floor. "I knew he was worried about Harrison, but this is beyond the pale!"

"I apologize," said Hughes. "I wanted a fresh outlook so badly, I seem to have overstepped my . . ."

"Oh, be quiet," Roosevelt interrupted him. "I'm staying."

"But I thought you said—"

"Americans rise to challenges. I'll rise to this one. I'm just annoyed at the way you went about securing my services." He frowned again. "I'll show that corrupt fool in the White House! I'll solve your murder *and* get back to the States in time to help Ben Harrison defeat him in the election!"

"You'll stay?" said Hughes. "I can't tell you what this means! And of course, I'll help you in any way I can."

"You can start by checking me out of this palace and finding me a room in Whitechapel."

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"In *Whitechapel?*" repeated Hughes with obvious distaste. "My dear Theodore, it simply isn't done."

"Well, it's about to *get* done," said Roosevelt. "I saw the way the onlookers stared at you, as if you were the enemy, or at least a foreign power. If they're going to learn to trust me, then I've got to live like they do. I can't look for a killer until dinnertime, then come back to the Savoy, don a tuxedo, and mingle with the rich and the powerful until the next morning."

"If you insist."

"I do. I just want time to send a wire to my wife Edith, explaining why I won't be on the ship when it docks."

"We can send for her, if—"

"American men do not put their wives in harm's way," said Roosevelt severely.

"No, of course not," said Hughes, getting hastily to his feet. "I'll send my carriage by for you in an hour. Is there any other way I can assist you?"

"Yes. Gather all the newspaper articles and anything else you have on these murders. Once I've got a room in Whitechapel, I'll want all the material sent there."

"You can have everything we've got on Saucy Jack."

"Some name!" snorted Roosevelt contemptuously.

"Well, he does seem to have acquired another one, though it's not clear yet whether he chose it himself or the press gave it to him."

"Oh?"

"Jack the Ripper."

"Much more fitting," said Roosevelt, nodding his head vigorously.

My Dearest Edith:

I'm having Mr. Carlson hand deliver this letter to you, to explain why I'm not aboard the ship.

Let me first assure you that I'm in perfect health. My extended stay here is due to a pair of conscienceless culprits—the President of the United States and someone known only as Jack the Ripper.

The latter has embarked on a rampage of murder that would shock even our own Western shootists such as Doc Holliday and Johnny Ringo. You do not need to know the details, but believe me when I say that this fiend must be brought to justice.

An officer from Scotland Yard has read of my experiences in the Dakota Bad Lands and asked Grover Cleveland to "loan" me to the British until these murders have been solved—and Cleveland pounced on such an excuse to remove me from the upcoming campaign.

With luck, I'll have things sorted out and solved in time to see Ben Harrison take the oath of office in a little less than two months.

My best to Alice and little Ted.

Your Theodore

Roosevelt sat on a rickety wooden chair, his back to the window, thumbing through Hughes' files.

It was clear that Polly Nichols was a Ripper victim. He doubted that the three who preceded her—Emma Smith, Ada Wilson, and Martha Tabram—were. They'd been brutally murdered, but the *modus operandi* differed appreciably from the two most recent killings.

The files were *very* circumspect about the Royal who had come under sus-

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picion, but Roosevelt deduced that it was Prince Eddy, more formally Albert Victor, son of the Prince of Wales and, quite possibly, the future King of England.

Roosevelt put the papers down, leaned back on his chair, and closed his eyes. It just didn't make any sense. It would be as if James Garfield had walked into a Washington slum and killed a pair of women and no one had recognized him. It was true that Prince Eddy was a dissolute and depraved man, and Roosevelt held him in total contempt—but there was just no way he could walk fifty yards in any direction, in or out of Whitechapel, without being recognized.

He removed his spectacles, rubbed his eyes, and then stood up. It was time to stop hypothesizing and go out and meet the residents of the area. He needed to talk to them, get to know them, and learn *their* opinions, which, he was sure, would be worth more than the police's.

He walked over to a decrepit coat rack, then paused and smiled. He crossed the room to his steamer trunk, opened it, and a few moments later was dressed in the fringed buckskin he wore at his Dakota ranch. (It had been designed by his favorite New York haberdasher, since all the Dakotans were busily trying to look like New Yorkers.) He took off his shining black shoes and pulled on a pair of well-worn boots. Then he tucked a knife and a pistol into his belt.

He considered a coonskin hat, but decided to wear a Stetson instead. He looked at himself in the fly-specked mirror and grinned in approval. As long as he was going to be identified as an American the moment he opened his mouth, he might as well dress like one.

He walked out the door of his shabby building, and was immediately aware that he had become an object of notoriety. Every pedestrian within sight stopped to stare at him. Even horse-drawn carriages slowed down as they passed by.

He grinned at them, waved, and began making his way to the Black Swan, next to where Annie Chapman's body had been found. A number of curious onlookers had followed him, and most of them entered the tavern when he did.

He walked up to the bar, staring approvingly at his image in the mirror that faced him.

"I didn't know the circus had come to Whitechapel!" laughed a burly man who was standing a few feet away.

Roosevelt smiled and extended his hand. "Theodore Roosevelt. Pleased to meet you."

"Hey, you're a Yank!" said the man. "Ain't never met one before." He paused and frowned. "Don't rightly know if I like Yanks."

"Them the duds you fight Indians in, guv?" asked another.

"We don't fight Indians any more," answered Roosevelt.

"Killed 'em all, did you?"

"No. Now we live side by side with them."

"I heard they was all killers," said the burly man. "They go around cuttin' people's heads off."

"Most of them are pretty decent people," said Roosevelt, seeing an opportunity to bring up the subject he wanted to discuss. "And even the bad ones couldn't hold a candle to your Saucy Jack."

"Old Jack?" said the burly man with a shrug. "He's off the deep end, he is. Mad as a hatter and ten times as vicious."

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"Has anyone here seen him?" asked Roosevelt.

"The only people what's seen him is lying in the morgue chopped up in bits and pieces," said a woman.

"They say he eats their innards," offered another, looking scared as she downed her drink.

"He only goes after women," added the burly man. "Men either fight too hard or don't taste so good."

"Maybe your women should go armed," suggested Roosevelt.

"What good would it do?" responded a woman. "If you're with a john, you don't need no weapon—and if you find you're with old Jack, you ain't got time to use it."

"That's muddled thinking," said Roosevelt.

"Who are you to come in here and tell us how to think?" said the burly man pugnaciously.

"I'm a friend who wants to help."

"Not if you don't live in Whitechapel, you ain't," said the man. "We ain't got no friends except for them what's stuck here."

"You didn't give me a chance to answer," said Roosevelt. "Yes, I live in Whitechapel."

"I ain't never seen you around," said a man from the back of the tavern.

"Me neither," chimed in another.

"I just arrived."

"This ain't a place where you 'arrive,' Yank," said the burly man. "It's a place where you get dumped while the rest of London pisses on you."

"Bloody right!" said another of the women, "I'll bet the coppers are probably cheering for old Jack. Every time he strikes, there's less of us for them to worry about."

"If the police won't hunt him down, we'll have to do it ourselves," said Roosevelt.

"What do you mean—*ourselves?*" said the burly man. "You ain't one of us! What do you care?"

"All right-thinking men should care," responded Roosevelt. "There's a crazed killer out there. We have to protect society and bring him to the bar of justice."

"What kind of man dresses like a dandy and wants to hunt down Jack the Ripper? It just don't make no sense." He glared at the American. "You sure you ain't a writer for one of them magazines—them penny dreadfuls, here to make a hero out of old Jack?"

"I told you: I want to hunt him down."

"And when he jumps you, you'll point out that it's not fair to hit a man with spectacles!" guffawed the burly man.

Roosevelt removed his glasses, folded them carefully, and set them down on the bar.

"There are many things I don't need glasses for," he said, jutting out his chin. "You're one of them."

"Are you challenging me to a fight, Yank?" said the burly man, surprised.

"Personally, I'd much rather fight the Ripper," said Roosevelt. "But it's up to you."

The man suddenly laughed and threw a huge arm around Roosevelt's shoulders. "I like your nerve, Yank! My name's Colin Shrank, and you and me are going to be great friends!"

Roosevelt grinned. "That suits me just fine. Let me buy you a drink."

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"A pint of ale!" Shrank yelled to the bartender. He turned back to Roosevelt. "You're here too early, Yank. Old Jack, he only comes out at night."

"But I see a number of ladies here, and at least some of them must be prostitutes," said Roosevelt.

"They ain't hardly ladies," said Shrank with a laugh, "and they're here because he's got 'em too scared to work at night, which is the proper time for their particular business."

"Too bloody true!" chimed in one of the women. "You ain't gettin' *me* out after dark!"

"I don't even feel safe in the daylight," said another.

"Did anyone here know Polly Nichols or Annie Chapman?" asked Roosevelt.

"I knew Annie," said the bartender. "Came here near every night to find a new bloke. Nice lady, she was."

"Why would she go off with the Ripper?" asked Roosevelt.

"Well, she didn't know it was the Ripper, now did she?" answered the bartender.

Roosevelt shook his head. "Everyone in Whitechapel knows that prostitutes are at risk, so why would Annie go out with someone she didn't know?"

"There's thousands of men come here every night," answered one of the prostitutes. "Maybe tens of thousands. What're the odds any one of them is Jack the Ripper?"

"It ain't *our* fault," said another. "We're just out to make a living. It's the police and the press and all them others. They don't care what happens here. They'd burn Whitechapel down, and us with it, if they thought they could get away with it."

A heavyset woman entered the tavern, walked right up to the bar, and thumped it with her fist.

"Yeah, Irma," said the bartender. "What'll it be?"

"A pint," she said in a deep voice.

"Hard night?"

"Four of 'em." She shook her head disgustedly. "You'd think they'd learn. They never do."

"That's what they've got you for," said the bartender.

She grimaced and took her beer to a table.

"What was that all about?" asked Roosevelt.

"Irma, she's a midwife," answered Shrank.

"She delivered four babies last night?"

Shrank seemed amused. "She cut four of 'em out before they became a bother."

"A *midwife* performs abortions?" said Roosevelt, surprised. "Don't you have doctors for that?"

"Look around you, Yank. There's ten times as many rats as people down here. A gent's got to be as well-armed as you if he don't want to get robbed. Women are being sliced to bits by a monster and no one does nothing about it. So you tell me: why would a doctor work here if he could work anywhere else?"

"No one cares about Whitechapel," said Irma bitterly.

"Well, they'd better *start* caring," said Roosevelt. "Because if this butcher isn't caught, you're going to be so awash in blood that you might as well call it Redchapel."

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"Redchapel," repeated Shrank. "I like that! Hell, if we change the name, maybe they'd finally pay attention to what's going on down here."

"Why do you think he's going to kill again?" asked the bartender.

"If his motive is to kill prostitutes, there are still hundreds of them left in Whitechapel."

"But everyone knows he's crazy," said Shrank. "So maybe he never had no motive at all."

"All the more reason for him to strike again," said Roosevelt. "If he had no reason to start, then he also has no reason to stop."

"Never thought of that," admitted Shrank. He gave Roosevelt a hearty slap on the back. "You got a head on your shoulders, Yank! What do you do back in America?"

"A little of everything," answered Roosevelt. "I've been a politician, a rancher, a Deputy Marshal, a naturalist, an ornithologist, a taxidermist, and an author."

"That's a hell of a list for such a young bloke."

"Well, I have one other accomplishment that I'm glad you didn't make me show off," said Roosevelt.

"What was that?"

Roosevelt picked his glasses up from the bar and flashed Shrank another grin. "I was lightweight boxing champion of my class at Harvard."

My Dearest Edith:

I must be a more formidable figure than I thought. No sooner do I agree to help apprehend Jack the Ripper than he immediately goes into hiding.

I have spent the past two weeks walking every foot of the shabby slum known as Whitechapel, speaking to everyone I meet, trying to get some information—any information—about this madman who is making headlines all over the world. It hasn't been productive—though in another way it has, for it has shown me how not to govern a municipality, and I suspect the day will come when that will prove very useful knowledge indeed.

I know America has its rich and its poor, its leaders and its followers, but any man can, through his own sweat and skills, climb to the top of whatever heap he covets. I find England's class system stifling, and I keep wondering where America would be if, for example, Abraham Lincoln had been forced to remain the penniless frontiersman he had been born. We have Negroes who were born into slavery who will someday hold positions of wealth and power, and while slavery is a shameful blot on our history, it was a system that men of good will and reason eventually destroyed. I see no such men attempting to bring about the necessary changes in British society.

I walk through Whitechapel, and I can envision what a handful of Americans, with American know-how and American values, could do to it in five years' time. And yet I fear it is doomed to remain exactly what it is until the buildings finally collapse of their own decrepitude.

I have made some friends among the residents, many of whom have been extremely hospitable to an alien. (Yes, I know I was well treated by the Royal Society, but I came there with a reputation as an expert. I came to Whitechapel only as an outsider. And yet I find I prefer to rub shoulders with the common man on this side of the ocean, even as I have always done at home.)

One special friend is a day laborer (who seems to labor as infrequently as possible) named Colin Shrank, who has been my guide down the fog-shrouded streets and filthy alleys of Whitechapel. As I say, we've discovered no use-

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ful information, but at least I now feel I have a reasonably thorough working knowledge of the geography of the place, a knowledge I will be only too happy to expunge the moment I return to our beloved Sagamore Hill.

My best to Alice and little Ted.

Your Theodore

Roosevelt opened a letter, tossing the envelope carelessly on the bar of the Black Swan.

"Another note from your pal Hughes?" asked Shrank.

Roosevelt nodded. "He's through asking who the Ripper is. Now he just wants to know if he's through killing women."

Shrank shrugged. "Could be."

Roosevelt shook his head. "I doubt it. I think he takes too much joy in killing and disemboweling helpless women."

"Up against a man with a knife like that, they're *all* helpless," offered Shrank.

"Not so, Colin." Roosevelt looked around the tavern, and his gaze came to rest on Irma, the burly midwife. "The women he's attacked have all been on the slender side. If he went after someone like Irma here, he might have a real battle on his hands."

"I'm no prostitute!" snapped Irma indignantly. "I honor the Bible and the Commandments!"

"No offense intended," said Roosevelt quickly. "I was just suggesting that perhaps being a prostitute is not the Ripper's sole criterion, that maybe he goes after women he knows he can dispatch quickly."

"Why quickly, if he's having such a good time?" asked the bartender.

"Secrecy is his ally," answered Roosevelt. "He can't butcher them unless he kills them before they can scream. That means they can't struggle for more than a second or two."

"Ever been anything like him in America?" asked Shrank.

"Not to my knowledge. Certainly not in our cities, where such crimes would not go unnoticed and unreported."

"They gets noticed and reported, all right," said a woman. "Just no one cares, is all."

Roosevelt looked out the window. "It's starting to get dark." He walked to the door. "Come on, Colin. It's time to make our rounds."

"You go alone tonight," said Shrank, taking a drink of his ale.

"Aren't you feeling well?"

"I feel fine. But I been walking those damned bloody streets with you every night since he chopped Annie Chapman. It's been raining all day, and the wind bites right through my clothes to my bones, so I'm staying here. If you spot him, give a holler and I'll join you."

"Stick around, Theodore," added the bartender. "He ain't out there. Hell, he's probably got his throat sliced on the waterfront."

Roosevelt shook his head. "If I can save a single life by patrolling the streets, then I have no choice but to do it."

"That's the coppers' job," insisted Shrank.

"It's the job of every civic-minded citizen who cares about the safety of Whitechapel," replied Roosevelt.

"That lets you out. You ain't no citizen."

"Enough talk," said Roosevelt, standing at the door, hands on hips. "You're sure you won't come with me?"

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"I can't even keep up with you in *good* weather," said Shrank.

Roosevelt shrugged. "Well, I can't stand here talking all night."

He turned and walked out into the fog for another fruitless night of hunting for the Ripper.

Roosevelt felt a blunt object poking his shoulder. He sat up, swinging wildly at his unseen assailant.

"Stop, Theodore!" cried a familiar voice. "It's me—John Hughes."

Roosevelt swung his feet to the floor. "You're lucky I didn't floor you again."

"I learned my lesson the first time," said Hughes, displaying a broom. "The handle's two meters long."

"All right, I'm awake," said Roosevelt. "Why are you here?"

"Jack the Ripper has struck again."

"*What?*" yelled Roosevelt, leaping to his feet.

"You heard me."

"What time is it?" asked Roosevelt as he threw his clothes on.

"About 3:30 in the morning."

"It's Sunday, right?"

"That's correct."

"Damn! I only went to bed about half an hour ago! Where did it happen?"

"In a little court off Berner Street," said Hughes. "And this time he was interrupted."

"By whom?"

"We're not sure."

"That doesn't make sense."

"Come with me, and I'll explain."

Roosevelt finished dressing. "Let's go."

"There it is," said Hughes as he and Roosevelt stared at the woman's body. The head lay in a pool of blood. "He cut her throat and slashed her face, but there's no other damage. He'd pulled her dress up and was just about to cut her belly open when he was interrupted."

"What makes you think he was interrupted?" asked Roosevelt. "Why couldn't he just have stopped for some other reason?"

"Because those two gentlemen"—Hughes pointed at a pair of locals who were speaking with two officers—"heard the scuffle and approached from different directions. We don't know which one startled him—for all we know, he might have heard them both—but he suddenly took flight. They saw the body, realized what had happened, and gave chase."

"For how long?"

Hughes shrugged. "Three or four blocks, before they knew for sure they'd lost him."

"Did they get a glimpse of him?" persisted Roosevelt. "Any kind of description at all?"

Hughes shook his head. "But one of them, Mr. Packer, alerted us, and the body was still warm and bleeding when we found it. We couldn't have missed him by five minutes." He paused. "We've got a hundred men scouring every street and alley in Whitechapel. With a little luck we may find him."

"May I speak to the two witnesses?" asked Roosevelt.

"Certainly."

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Hughes accompanied Roosevelt as the American approached the men. "This is Mr. Roosevelt," he announced. "Please answer his questions as freely as you would answer mine."

Roosevelt walked up to the taller of the two men. "I only have a couple of questions for you. The first is: how old are you?"

"Thirty-four," said the man, surprised.

"And how long have you lived in Whitechapel?"

"All my life, guv."

"Thank you."

"That's all you want to know?" asked the man.

"That's all," said Roosevelt. He turned to the smaller man. "Could you answer the same two questions, please?"

"I'm twenty-eight. Ain't never been nowhere else." He paused. "Well, I took the missus to the zoo oncet."

"Thank you. I have no further questions." He shook the smaller man's hand, then walked back to look at the corpse again. "Have you identified her yet?"

Hughes nodded. "Elizabeth Stride. Long Liz, they called her."

"A prostitute, of course?"

"Yes."

"When was the last time anyone saw her alive?"

"She was seen at Bricklayers Tavern just before midnight," answered Hughes.

"With a customer?"

"Yes, but she'd already serviced him. He has an alibi for the time of the murder."

"Which was when?"

"About forty-five minutes ago." Hughes looked off into the fog. "I wonder if he's still out there?"

"If he is, I'm sure that—"

He was interrupted by a woman's scream.

"Where did *that* come from?" demanded Hughes.

"I don't know, sir," said one of the policemen. "Either straight ahead or off to the left. It's difficult to tell."

He turned back to Roosevelt. "What do you . . . *Theodore!!!*"

But the American was already racing into the fog, gun in hand.

"Follow him!" shouted Hughes to his men.

"But—"

"He's a hunter! I trust his instincts!"

They fell into stride behind Roosevelt, who ran through the darkness until he reached Church Passage. He leaned forward in a gunfighter's crouch and peered into the fog.

"It came from somewhere near here," he whispered as Hughes finally caught up with him. "Where does this thing lead?" he asked, indicating the narrow passage.

"To Mitre Street."

"Let's go," said Roosevelt, moving forward silently. He traversed the passage, emerged on Mitre Street, spotted a bulky object in an open yard, and quickly ran over to it.

"Damn!" muttered Hughes as he joined the American. "Another one!"

"Post a man to watch the body and make sure no one touches anything," said Roosevelt. "The Ripper can't be more than a minute ahead of us."

He trotted off down Mitre Street. The police began using their whistles to

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identify each other, and soon the shrill noise became almost deafening. Roosevelt had gone a short distance when he heard a faint moaning coming from a recessed doorway. He approached the source warily, gun in hand.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"Thank God it's you, sir!" said a familiar voice, and as he moved closer he realized that it was Irma, the midwife. He lit a match and saw a large bruise over her left temple.

"What happened?"

"I was coming back from Elsie Bayne's when I heard a woman scream. Then a bloke dressed all in black run down the street and bowled me over." She was overcome by a sudden dizziness.

"Did you see his features?"

"He had crazy eyes," said Irma. "The kind what gives you nightmares."

"What color were they?"

"I don't know," she said helplessly. "It's dark."

"How tall was he?"

"Taller than you, sir," she replied. "Much taller. And thin. Like a skeleton, he was!"

"Was there anything, however small, that you can remember?" demanded Roosevelt. "Think hard. It's important."

"All I know is he wore black gloves."

"No distinguishing marks?"

"Just the wound."

"Wound?" said Roosevelt, pouncing on the word. "What wound?"

"On his cheek. It was dripping blood, it was."

"Which cheek?"

"I don't remember."

"Please try."

She frowned as if trying to recall, then whimpered in pain. "I don't know, sir." She looked down the street, where some bobbies were approaching them. "He done sliced another one, didn't he, sir?"

The American nodded. "Not far from here."

"These poor women!" sobbed Irma, starting to cry. "When will it stop?"

Roosevelt stood up. "You're our only eyewitness," he said. "The police artist may want to speak to you later."

"But I done told you what I know!"

"Other details may come back to you. Try to cooperate with him."

She nodded her head while rubbing her tears away with a filthy coat sleeve, and Roosevelt turned to the nearest officer. "When she feels strong enough, take her to the nearest hospital." He turned and walked rapidly back to the latest victim.

"He really did a job on this one, sir," said one of the policemen, staring down at the corpse.

The woman's throat had been slit from ear to ear. The Ripper had then opened her up from neck to groin and gutted her like a fish. Each of her internal organs lay on the ground, neatly arranged in a seemingly meaningless pattern. A piece of her apron had been cut away; the Ripper had evidently use it to wipe his knife.

"Jesus!" said another officer, staring in fascination. "I never saw anyone sliced up like this!"

"You're the taxidermist, Theodore," said Hughes, joining them. "Can you tell if anything's missing?"

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Roosevelt studied the organs. "A kidney, I think."

"I'll have the police surgeon make sure," said Hughes. He paused. "If you're right, then we have to ask the question: as crazy as he is, *why* would he steal her kidney?"

"I'd hate to know the answer to that one, sir," said one of the policemen.

"Does anyone know who she is?" asked Roosevelt.

"If she's got any identification on her, it's too blood-soaked to read it," replied Hughes. "We'll ask around. We should know by morning."

Roosevelt walked away from the corpse, then signaled Hughes to join him.

"What is it, Theodore?"

"I wanted to speak where we couldn't be overheard," replied Roosevelt. "I'm sure you'll be happy to know that we can definitely eliminate Prince Eddy from the list of suspects."

"I am, of course," said Hughes. "But how do you know?"

"I've met him," said Roosevelt. "He's a weak man, ravaged by disease. He could barely grip my hand."

"Are you saying he's too weak to have killed these women?" asked Hughes, looking unconvinced.

"Anyone can kill an unsuspecting victim with a knife," responded the American.

"Well, then?"

"Your two witnesses," said Roosevelt. "They were twenty-eight and thirty-four years old, in the prime of life. They were healthy, and neither was carrying any excess weight. And they know their way around Whitechapel." Roosevelt paused. "How could such an ill man, especially one who doesn't know the area, outrun them? Remember, they said they chased him for three or four blocks. The Albert Victor I met couldn't have run for *one* block, let alone four."

"Thank you, Theodore," said Hughes, obviously relieved. "You've lifted an enormous burden from me."

"Forget about him, and concentrate on what we *do* know," said the American. "For example, we know that the Ripper has an intimate knowledge of Whitechapel or he couldn't have evaded his pursuers. In fact, he evaded pursuit twice in one night, because we couldn't have been sixty seconds behind him at the site of *this* murder, and he vanished like an Apache in the Arizona hills."

"He probably ducked into a building after he bumped into the midwife," said Hughes.

"How would he know which ones were unlocked if he didn't know the area like the back of his hand? Whatever else he may or may not be, the Ripper is a resident of Whitechapel."

"Blast!" muttered Hughes. "That probably clears a second suspect as well."

"Oh?"

"A Dr. Thomas Neill Cream. But he wouldn't know Whitechapel any better than Prince Eddy. Furthermore, he's quite fat. I doubt that he could have outrun *any*one."

Roosevelt stared off into the distance, frowning.

"Is something wrong, Theodore?"

"Of course something's wrong," said Roosevelt irritably. "That madman has butchered two more women right under our noses." He continued looking into the fog and frowning. "And I'm missing something."

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"What?"

He frowned again. "I don't know. But it's something I *should* know, something I'm sure I've overlooked."

"Can I be of any assistance?" asked Hughes.

Roosevelt remained motionless for another moment, then shrugged and shook his head.

The morgue wagon arrived, Hughes began supervising the removal of the corpse, and Roosevelt went back to his room where he replayed the events of the evening over and over in his mind, looking for the detail he had missed.

My Dearest Edith:

They identified the evening's second victim, a poor prostitute named Catherine Eddowes. I know I said I would be coming home shortly, but I cannot leave while this fiend remains at large.

There is no question that he will strike again, but when and where is almost impossible to predict. There seems to be no pattern to his murders until after he has dispatched his victim, and then the pattern is one that I shall not distress you by describing.

There was absolutely nothing I could do to prevent the four murders, but I have the uneasy feeling that I have the ability right now to prevent any further killings, if I could but see the tree rather than the forest. I am certain I know something that might lead to his apprehension, yet I have no idea what that knowledge may be.

Ah, well, there is no need to worry you with my problems. I shall be on the first ship home after this dreadful affair has been brought to a successful conclusion, hopefully in time to make a speech or two on Ben Harrison's behalf, and then perhaps we'll take Alice and little Ted on a vacation to Yosemite or the Yellowstone.

Your Theodore

"Where were you last night?" demanded Roosevelt when he entered the Black Swan on the morning of October 1.

"Right here," answered Colin Shrank. "You think I sliced them two women?"

"I just want to know what time you went home," said Roosevelt.

"Two o'clock or so."

"The first of them wasn't killed until almost three."

"Well, it weren't me!" snapped Shrank. "I didn't kill no bloody women!"

"I never said you did," said Roosevelt.

"Then why all the questions?"

"Because the one night you didn't make the rounds with me, the Ripper claimed two more victims. I think I should at least inquire after your whereabouts."

"Where was *you?*" shot back Shrank.

"I was in bed when Elizabeth Stride was murdered, but I was in Captain Hughes' company when Catherine Eddowes was killed," replied Roosevelt.

"So are you saying I done it or not?" said Shrank belligerently, his hands balled into massive fists.

Roosevelt stared long and hard at the man, then sighed. "No, I'm not."

"Good!" said Shrank. "And just to show there's no hard feelings, I'll let you buy me a pint of ale."

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Roosevelt nodded to the bartender. "And I'll take a cup of coffee."

"Ain't got no coffee, Mr. Roosevelt," said the bartender. "How about a cup of tea?"

"That'll do," said Roosevelt, walking over to a table and sitting down.

"Now we're friends again, what made you decide I *ain't* the Ripper?" asked Shrank.

"Your education."

"What education?" laughed Shrank. "I ain't never been to school in my life!"

"*That* education," said Roosevelt. "If you killed someone, could you find the spleen?"

"What's a spleen?"

"How about the pancreas?"

"Never heard of them."

"Point to where you think my lungs are."

Shrank pointed.

"There's your answer," said Roosevelt. "The Ripper knows where those organs are."

"How do you know I'm not lying?" said Shrank.

"Where would you have learned?"

"Maybe I read it in a book."

"Can you read?"

Suddenly Shrank laughed aloud. "Not a word!"

Roosevelt smiled. "One more reason why you're not the Ripper."

"One *more?*" repeated Shrank. "What was the first?"

"I've seen you get winded *walking* three blocks. The Ripper *ran* for at least half a mile last night and eluded some very fit pursuers."

"Then why'd you come in asking questions like that?"

"I'm just being thorough."

"I thunk we was friends—mates, you might say," said Shrank.

"We are. But if you were the Ripper, that wouldn't stop me from putting you away."

"At least you give a damn. I can't say as much for the rest of 'em."

"You mean the police?" responded Roosevelt. "You misjudge them. They've got hundreds of men working on the case."

"Only because the press keeps goading 'em," said Shrank. "But they don't care about us or Whitechapel. They'll catch the Ripper and then cross us off the map again."

"What do you think would make them do something about Whitechapel?" asked Roosevelt.

"It'll sound balmy—but as long as Saucy Jack's around, they pay attention to us. Maybe having him ain't such a bad thing after all." Shrank laughed bitterly. "He slices up another forty or fifty women, they might clean this place up and turn it into Hyde Park."

"No," said the bartender with a smile. "Mayfair."

"You really think so?" asked Roosevelt.

"Nobody paid no attention to us before the Ripper, Mr. Roosevelt, and that's a fact," said the bartender.

"That's a very interesting outlook," said Roosevelt. "But I'll keep trying to catch him anyway."

"Maybe old Jack is really your pal Hughes," offered Shrank. "Y'know, he's always the first one at the body."

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Roosevelt shook his head. "I was with him when the second woman was killed last night."

"It's a puzzle, all right."

"There are a *lot* of puzzles in this case," said Roosevelt.

"You mean, besides who is he?" said Shrank.

"Yes," said Roosevelt. He frowned again. *For example,* he thought, *why would he have walked off with Catherine Eddowes' kidney?*

It took sixteen days for Roosevelt to get his answer. Then Hughes summoned him and showed him a crudely scrawled message that had been sent to George Lusk, the head of the Whitechapel Vigilance Committee.

"From Hell, Mr. Lusk—
Sir, I send you half the Kidne I took from one woman,
prasarved it for you tother piece I fried and ate it was
very nise I may send you the bloody knif that too it out
if you only wate a whil longer
signed Catch me when yu can Mishter Lusk"
—Jack the Ripper
October 16, 1888

"Well, at least now we know why the kidney was missing," said Hughes. A look of disgust crossed his face. "Do you really think he ate it?"

Roosevelt shrugged. "Who knows? He's certainly *capable* of eating it." He stared at the letter. "Does the handwriting match the previous messages?"

Hughes nodded. "It's the same man, all right."

Roosevelt lowered his head in thought for a moment. "All right," he said. "Here's what you must do. Make copies of that letter and give it to every newspaper in London."

"We can't do that, Theodore! There would be widespread panic."

"I hope so."

"I beg your pardon!" said Hughes heatedly.

"Try to understand, John," said Roosevelt. "Everyone in Whitechapel has been aware of the Ripper for more than a month. Prostitutes know that they're his quarry, and yet they continue to ply their trade and put themselves at risk. Maybe if they read this, if they get a brief peek into the mind of this madman, we can keep them off the streets until he's apprehended."

"Keep prostitutes off the streets?" laughed a nearby policeman. "You might as well try to keep the sun from rising."

"It's that, or prepare yourselves for more murders."

"It's not my decision to make," replied Hughes. "You've been working on this case at my request, and I've been your sole contact, so you can be forgiven for thinking that I'm in charge . . . but in point of fact we have more than five hundred police officers working around the clock on the Ripper murders. I'll have to go through channels before we can get it published."

"What if I just took it to the papers, and said that I hadn't told you what I'd planned?"

"You'd be on the first ship back to America, and I doubt that your presence would ever be tolerated in England again."

That's no great loss in a land that worships royalty and allows something like Whitechapel to exist, thought Roosevelt. Aloud he said, "All right, John—but hurry! The sooner this is made known to the press, the better."

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Hughes picked up the letter and stared at it. "I'll do what I can," he said.
"So will we all," replied Roosevelt.

Nothing happened.

A day passed, then a week, then three. The police again began suggesting that the Ripper might have been killed by some other member of the criminal class—there were enough stabbings and bludgeonings in Whitechapel and on the waterfront to write *fini* to a dozen Rippers.

Even Roosevelt relaxed his guard. He spent a day birding in the Cotswolds. He made a speech to the Royal Zoological Society, and another to Parliament. He found the time to write three articles and more than one hundred letters.

And still, he couldn't rid himself of the nagging feeling that this was the calm before the storm, and that he possessed some small but vital piece of the puzzle that could help him prevent another murder.

On the evening of November 8, he sat down to write a letter to his wife.

My Dearest Edith:

It has been almost six weeks since the fiend last struck, and most of the authorities here have convinced themselves that he is dead, possibly by his own hand, possibly murdered. I don't agree. There was no pattern of regularity to his prior killings. The first and second were separated by nine days, the second and third by twenty-two days, the third and fourth by no more than an hour. Since there has been no pattern, I don't see how they can conclude that he's broken one.

As I mentioned in previous letters, some of the police still lean toward Prince Albert Victor, which is simply beyond the realm of possibility. All of their other suspects also seem to come from the upper classes: a doctor, a lawyer, a shipbuilder. They mean well, the London Metropolitan Police, but they simply lack American practicality as they go about this most important and onerous task.

I may not send this letter to you at all, because I do not want the details to cause you dismay, but I need to clarify my thinking by putting things down on paper.

I begin with the question: what do we know about Jack the Ripper?

It's true that there is an eyewitness account that makes him a head taller than myself, and thoroughly emaciated, but it was made by an hysterical woman whose veracity cannot be relied upon. Still, it's all the police have to go on, and that is the man they are searching for.

But that is all we know empirically. The rest comes from logic—or the science of deduction, to borrow from Sherlock Holmes, the fictional detective who has made such an impact here in the past year.

And what can I deduce?

First, he has at least a rudimentary knowledge of anatomy. The nature of the mutilations implies that he takes pleasure in removing certain internal organs—and he was able to tell a kidney from other organs in near-total darkness on the night of September 30.

Second, he is trying to delude us into thinking he is illiterate. That letter of his is a masterpiece of misdirection—for if he is a doctor, or if he has even studied medicine for a year, how could his spelling, diction and penmanship be so indicative of a barely literate man?

Third, he must possess an intimate knowledge of Whitechapel. The only

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time he was seen he eluded his pursuers, and being unseen the other times also implies familiarity with his surroundings.

Fourth, these murders must be planned in advance—a theory I have not shared with the police, because none of them would accept such a notion. But damn it, he had *to know when and where he would kill each of his victims! Because if he didn't, then how did he get fresh clothing, and without fresh clothing, how did this man, who must have been soaked in the blood of his victims, escape detection as he walked through the streets of Whitechapel on his way back to wherever he goes when his foul work is done? He* must *have had a clean set of clothes hidden within yards of his victim, and that implies premeditation.*

Fifth, and this is the one that I cannot begin to answer: even though they have been alerted, even though they know the Ripper is lurking in the darkness, he is nonetheless able to approach his victims with complete impunity. Do they know him? Does he appear so wealthy that they feel it is worth the risk? What leads otherwise cautious women to allow this fiend to approach them? There has been no sign of a struggle at any of the murder scenes. No victim has tried to run from him.

Why?

Roosevelt pulled out his timepiece and opened it. It was 3:40 A.M., and he realized that he had fallen asleep.

He looked at the letter, read it over, frowned, and began writing again.

Why? Why? Why?

Suddenly there was a pounding on his door.

"Theodore, wake up!" shouted Hughes. "He's struck again! It's the worst yet!"

Room 13, 26 Dorset Street, was a scene straight out of hell.

Marie Jeanette Kelly—or what remained of her—lay on a blood-soaked bed. Her throat had been slashed. Her abdomen was sliced open. Both her breasts were cut off. Her liver and entrails had been ripped out and placed between her feet. Flesh from her thighs and her breasts had been put on a nearby table. Her right hand was stuck in her belly.

"My God!" exclaimed Hughes, covering his mouth and nose with a handkerchief.

"He was crazy to begin with, but this is past all imagining," said another officer. "He didn't cut her organs out, like the others. He reached in and *pulled* them out with his hands!"

"He had to be drenched in blood," said Roosevelt. "Surely someone saw him, if not here, then walking the street, or trying to hide until he could change into a clean outfit."

"Nobody saw a thing, sir," said the officer.

"They *had* to!" exclaimed Roosevelt. "They couldn't have missed him." He frowned and muttered: "But why didn't it register?"

Roosevelt paused, motionless—and then, slowly, a grin crossed the American's face. The officer stared at him as if he might soon start running amuck.

The American turned and walked to the door.

"Where are you going, Theodore?" asked Hughes.

"Back to my room," answered Roosevelt. "There's nothing more to see here."

"I'll be seeing it in my nightmares for the next thirty years," said Hughes grimly.

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Roosevelt went to his desk, opened a drawer, pulled out his pistol, filled it with cartridges, and put it in the pocket of his buckskin coat.

Then he took his pen out, and added a few lines to the letter he had been writing to Edith.

I curse my own blindness! I could have prevented this latest atrocity. I knew everything I had to know more than a month ago, but I didn't put it together until tonight.

I am going out now, to make sure this fiend never kills again.

Roosevelt sat in the dark, his pistol on his lap, waiting.

Finally the knob turned, and a short, burly figure entered the room.

"Hello, Jack," said Roosevelt, pointing his pistol at the figure.

"Jack? Who's Jack?"

"We both know what I'm talking about," said Roosevelt calmly.

"I just come back from helping poor Liza Willoughby!"

"No," said Roosevelt, shaking his head. "You just got back from murdering Marie Jeanette Kelly."

"You're daft!"

"And you're Jack the Ripper."

"You've done lost your bloody mind!" yelled Irma the midwife, finally stepping out of the shadows.

"The Ripper had to live in Whitechapel," said Roosevelt, never lowering the pistol. "He had to know the area intimately. Who knows it better than a woman who lives and works here and makes dozens of house calls every week?"

He watched her reaction, then continued.

"The Ripper had to have some knowledge of anatomy. Not much—but enough to know one organ from another. Your letter fooled me for awhile. I thought *it* was the misdirection, but I was wrong: you need no formal schooling for your work." He paused. "Are you following me so far?"

She glared at him silently.

"There were two things that bothered me," continued Roosevelt. "Why would these women let the Ripper approach them when they knew he was killing prostitutes in Whitechapel? They'd been warned repeatedly to watch out for strange men. But then I realized that you're a trusted, even a necessary, member of the community. They were all looking for Jack, not Jane.

"The other thing I couldn't figure out," he said, "was how the Ripper could walk around in blood-spattered clothing without drawing everyone's attention. I made the false assumption that the killer had picked the spots for his murders and hidden fresh clothing nearby." Roosevelt grimaced. "I was wrong. Those murders were so deranged I should have known there couldn't be anything premeditated about them. Then, when I was at Marie Kelly's apartment tonight, I saw how you ripped out her intestines with your hands and I *knew* how much blood you had to have splashed on yourself. It occurred to me that I've never seen you when you *weren't* wearing blood-stained clothes. After all, you do nothing all day but deliver babies and perform abortions; there's nothing unusual about a midwife's clothing being bloody."

"So maybe a midwife killed all them women!" yelled Irma. "Do you know how many midwives there are in Whitechapel? Why pick on me?"

"That's what's been haunting me for six weeks," answered Roosevelt. "I

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knew everything I had to know right after you killed Catherine Eddowes, and yet I couldn't piece it together until I realized that a midwife was the likely killer. You made a major blunder, and it took me until tonight to realize what it was."

"What are you talking about?" demanded Irma, curiosity mingling with hatred on her chubby face.

"You told me you heard a woman scream, and then the Ripper knocked you over while he was escaping from the scene of the crime."

"He did!" said Irma. "He come running out of the darkness and—"

"You're lying," said Roosevelt. "I should have known it immediately."

"It's God's own truth!"

He shook his head. "I found you on the ground less than a minute after we heard Catherine Eddowes scream. The Ripper knocked you down just before I got there, right?"

"Yeah, right."

Roosevelt grinned in triumph. "*That's* what I missed. It would have taken the Ripper five minutes or more to disembowel poor Catherine and arrange her innards on the ground the way he did. Surely she couldn't have screamed four minutes into that. She was dead before he started." The grin vanished. "That was *you* screaming. What better way to escape from the scene of a murder than to have a solicitous policeman escort you to a hospital? If there were any contradictions in your statements, we would write it off to hysteria. After all, you'd just come face to face with Jack the Ripper."

She glared at him balefully.

"Before we put an end to this, perhaps you'll tell me why you did it?"

"I told you before," said the midwife. "I honor the commandments. *They* broke 'em all! They were all sinners, and God told me to rid the world of 'em!"

"Did God tell you to disembowel them, too?" asked Roosevelt. "Or was that your own idea?"

Suddenly a butcher knife appeared in her hand. She held it above her head, screamed something unintelligible, and leaped toward him. Roosevelt never flinched. He kept the pistol trained on her and pulled the trigger.

She fell backward, a new red blotch appearing on the front of her blood-stained dress.

She tried to get up, and he fired once more. This time she lay still.

My Dearest Edith:

Please destroy this letter after you have read it.

I have faked the symptoms of the malaria I contracted some years ago on a trip to the Everglades, and have been relieved of my unofficial duties here. I will be put aboard the next ship to America (quite possibly on a stretcher, if you can imagine that!) and within a very few days I will once again be able to hold you and the children in my arms. And I'm pleased to see that Harrison defeated that fool Garfield without my help.

My work here is done. I would have preferred to arrest the fiend, but I was given no choice in the matter. Jack the Ripper is no more.

If I make that fact public, two things will happen. First, I will probably be arrested for murder. Second (and actually more important, for no jury would convict me once they have heard my story), Whitechapel will remain a blight upon the face of England. Whereas a conversation I had a few days ago has convinced me that as long as the British authorities think the madman is

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still at large, they might do something positive about eradicating Whitechapel's intolerable conditions. If that is so, then it may actually be serendipitous that only I (and now you) know that the Ripper is dead.

At least I hope that is the outcome. One would like to think that if one's life didn't count for much, at least one's death did—and if Whitechapel can either be cleansed or razed to the ground, then perhaps, just perhaps, these five unfortunate women did not die totally in vain.

Your Theodore

Theodore Roosevelt returned to London 22 years later, in 1910, on the way home from the year-long safari that followed his Presidency.

Whitechapel remained unchanged. O

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THE GOD OF CHILDREN

Richard Parks

Illustration by June Levine

Richard Parks spins a haunting tale of sorrow and compassion in his first story for Asimov's.

The old bullet train was an hour out of Narita. Eli Mothersbaugh checked his portable sensic now and then, out of habit. Mostly he watched the scenery blur by and wished he'd brought more paperwork with him. It wasn't a good time to be in Japan; his caseload at home was getting out of hand as it was. Still, it wasn't as if he could turn his old friend down.

"Obaasan is haunted."

That was all Hiro Yamada said; it was all he had to say.

"Excuse me, please."

The words were halting but clear enough. Eli glanced up to find a very pretty young girl in a high school uniform standing beside his seat. A few rows down, two more girls in identical blue sailor-suit uniforms were giggling encouragement to their classmate.

"Hai. Nan deshou?" Eli allowed himself a slight smile at the girl's evident embarrassment, then slipped back into English. "I'm sorry. My Japanese is very rusty and I don't get to practice often."

It turned out that the girl in turn wanted to practice her English with the *gaijin,* probably on a dare from her classmates. Eli suspected as much; similar things had happened on his one previous trip to Japan years before. But then, at that age, he'd expected things to happen to him. Now it was more of a treat.

The girl glanced at the object on his lap. "Very cute computer," she said, looking somewhat pleased with herself.

"It's called a 'sensic,' actually," Eli said. "An instrument to find things."

"Things? What sort of things, *Ojii-san?*"

Eli didn't need a dictionary for that one. It was a generic polite term meaning anything from "Grandfather" to "Old guy I met on the train." Eli sighed. Forty-three seemed ancient to sixteen. He remembered. "Spirits," Eli said to her. "Ghosts."

The girl's eyes got very big. For a moment, he thought that she was going to run back to her friends right then and there without another word. She managed to be more polite than that. "You must be very brave," she said, then retreated, whispering excitedly to her friends. Eli sighed. He didn't feel brave. Just old and tired and a long way from home. He started running diagnostics on the sensic again as the train patiently devoured the miles through Honshu.

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* * *

Hiro Yamada met him at the station. Hiro had gained a little weight since the last photo and letter; he looked quite well and prosperous, though there was a dullness about his eyes that suggested that he hadn't been sleeping well. The two men exchanged bows just to see who would crack first. That proved to be Eli. He stepped forward and grabbed his old friend in a bear hug.

"Wonderful to see you," Eli said, "whatever the reason."

Hiro managed a weak smile. "We won't talk of that right now, Eli-san. How was your trip?"

Eli told him about the girls on the train, and Yamada laughed. "Once we were as green in the vine as they are, and thought as they do. Now we are older; it's the way of things. So. Let's get you settled in. Tomoko's expecting us."

Eli had never met Yamada's housekeeper, but one thing was clear immediately when they reached his apartment: Tomoko Sowa did not look to "Madame Butterfly" for inspiration. A thirtyish woman, heavy-set, she eschewed kimono for jeans, blouse, and apron, smoked like a furnace, and made one fine T-bone steak. When supper was finished, she brought two cold beers into the room where Hiro and Eli sat by a low table, and then left them there with dire threats of what would happen should any of that beer spill on the mats.

Eli watched her go. "So this is the infamous Tomoko," he said. "Quite a character!"

Hiro shrugged. "She takes care of me. Men are so helpless that way, or so they would have us believe. That is one tradition that does not change." He paused, seeming to consider. "Perhaps I should marry her."

"She wouldn't have you. Besides, since when do your tastes run to women?"

His friend smiled, slipping into the more familiar form of address now that they were alone. "Eli, duty and my interests are often at odds. It's nothing new."

Eli didn't know what to say to that, so he didn't say anything. Supper had been at a western-style table but now they were in the *tatami* room, with low tables, no chairs, and mats for cushions. Eli was having a little trouble with the kneeling-on-the-floor tradition. He finally stretched out into a half-reclining position that worked fairly well. He took a sip of his beer, then nodded in grudging appreciation. "Good stuff. So. It's just us now. Tell me what's wrong with Obaasan."

Hiro smiled weakly. "That directness of addressing the issue. . . . It took me years to unlearn that after I came home." He sighed. "She's fading, Eli, and not because of her age."

"Why, then? Have you seen something?"

"No. But Miss Tanaka says Obaasan goes to her apartments behind the Shrine at a certain time of day, prepares *two* cups of tea, opens her doors, and waits. Miss Tanaka says my grandmother is waiting for someone that no one else can see."

"I mean no offense, but she must be in her late seventies by now. Have you ruled out dementia?"

Hiro smiled. "Do you remember my grandmother at all?"

Eli reddened just a bit. "I see your point."

"To answer what must come next: yes, she has seen a doctor on my insis-

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tence. And yes, purification of her rooms and wards against spirits have been posted at all corners of Yamada Shrine. Nothing has helped."

Hiro's family were the caretakers of one of the oldest and most revered shrines in the district. Eli didn't know a great deal about Shinto, but he did know that something was very wrong if Hiro's own grandmother and the shrine priests couldn't deal with the matter themselves. There was one more question, though.

"Forgive me for asking, but why me? Nakamura and Saito at Tokyo University were students of Dr. Nigel Flagard himself. They're two of the finest experts on bio-energy residues in the world!"

"True, but they are not friends. Moreover, they are Japanese."

Eli blinked. "I don't understand."

Hiro looked unhappy. "My grandmother is old and frail, but her mind is sharp as ever. She knows what you do now, since she often asks about you. She will know why you have come, whatever story I tell her." He hesitated, then went on, "She is the product of a different generation, Eli. She would not forgive me if I shamed her by bringing in spirit-hunters from our own country."

Eli nodded, understanding dawning. "Ah. I'm a *gaijin*. Outside the tribe. When I am gone, any tales of what happened go with me. I don't count."

"Well . . ."

Hiro put his hand behind his head. Eli didn't need the ubiquitous gesture to know he had embarrassed his friend with the truth. He waved it away. "You were only thinking of Obaasan. I am not offended."

"I am grateful for that. Yes, there is truth in what you say, but don't discount yourself. My grandmother became quite fond of you, and that might make a difference now. That is my hope, at least."

"And mine too. She's a remarkable woman. I will do what I can."

The Yamada Shrine was located on what looked like an acre of parkland near the edge of the city proper. One turn past the first bright red *torii* spirit gate and, except for an occasional murmur of traffic, they could have been in another time. The shrine was on a hill of maples, pines, and mossy stones. They walked up a wide stone path flanked by maples, their leaves just beginning to turn for fall. A short flight of steps led up to a wider approach, this marked by another *torii* that framed the sweeping curved roofline of Yamada Shrine.

"Wow," was all Eli said at first. "What's . . . different?"

Hiro frowned. "We have changed very little since your last visit . . . when? Twenty years ago?"

"About. I remembered how lovely the shrine is. But I don't . . ." Eli struggled to put his reaction into words. "I don't remember being so *aware* of it."

That sense of timelessness settled over Eli even more strongly now. The building style was several hundred years old, though Hiro had told him that the current shrine building itself only dated to just before World War II, and was one of the few structures to survive the Allied firebombing late in the war.

Eli groped for the words to express how he was feeling, couldn't quite reach them. The best he could do was a comparison. "I visited Chartres Cathedral in France about five years ago. It felt a lot like this."

Hiro looked shrewdly at him. "Perhaps it is *you* who has changed. I would have thought that reducing ghosts to a graph on a computer would have gone far to remove what sense of awe you might have had at the mysteries of the world."

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Eli smiled at him. "Quite the opposite. The more I learn of spirits the more I am reminded of just how much I do *not* understand!"

They came closer to the shrine, walking toward the side of the path rather than the middle, as Hiro directed. There was a reason for that but Eli didn't ask just then. He was more interested in everything else around him: the trees, the hill, the stones, the shrine. It was only when they reached the last terrace before the shrine doors that Eli remembered his sensic. He paused for a moment to switch it on. As the flat panel screen warmed up, he made a test sweep of his immediate surroundings.

The path through the woods was full of ghosts.

Eli checked and rechecked the readings the sensic gave him, but there was no mistake. He changed the display from charting to mapping and individual figures resolved themselves on his screen, as if he was looking at the monitor of a miniature camera. Some figures were so hazy as to be almost invisible, even to the sensic's finely tuned sensors. Others became very distinct as they drew nearer, like a solemn young woman in a bright blue kimono, normal-appearing in all respects save for a slash of red at her throat. For a moment it was like standing on a busy street; Eli instinctively stepped back from the path to avoid colliding with her.

"What do you see?" Hiro asked.

Eli said nothing, just showed him the screen.

Hiro sighed deeply. "This will make it difficult."

Eli stared at his friend for a moment. "You're not at all surprised about this, are you?"

"No, Eli. The Shrine is a source of comfort and stability in many people's lives, even in these modern times. Why wouldn't their unhappy spirits look to it after death?"

They both paused to watch a pair of soldiers approach, their uniforms and faces alike burned almost beyond recognition. At the last moment Eli handed the sensic to Hiro and stepped directly into their path. They trudged through and past him, taking no notice at all.

Eli touched his chest, frowning. "This isn't right. I didn't feel them."

Now Hiro frowned. "I don't understand. What did you expect?"

"I'm physically sensitive to the bio-energy signatures that mark a ghost; have been since I was a kid, though at the time I didn't know what they were. To make matters worse, our house was haunted. If Flagard hadn't published when he did, my folks might have had me committed. In any case, I should have felt those two."

"Not necessarily so. Didn't you just say that the presence of the shrine was near overwhelming? You forget that this is a sacred place. A *kami* lives here. Not a ghost as you understand it, but a spirit nonetheless. Your device tells you ghosts are here, but wouldn't they get lost in the...how should I say, 'background noise'? Frankly I was afraid your device also would not be able to separate the two. Its sensitivity seems to exceed your own."

Eli nodded, though he couldn't help feeling a little annoyed. "That could be. I felt no individual spirits when I was here before, nor at Chartres, now that you mention it. I'd expect a few in a site that old. I didn't have my sensic with me then, though."

"Just so." Hiro said. "It's the same principle."

"You know more about this subject than I realized, Hiro."

His friend chuckled. "I was in training to be a priest, up until and during the time we were at university. I still might be, one day. If Obaasan has her way."

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Eli changed the subject. "Since the presence of ghosts as such doesn't trouble you, I'm assuming it doesn't trouble your grandmother either."

"Yes, I would think that is so."

"So we're clearly looking for one *particular* ghost, if indeed such is the source of her misfortune. Something must set that spirit apart, perhaps something we can recognize."

Hiro shrugged. "My understanding of these matters is limited to traditional concepts. We have legends of spirits of many kinds. Those of people who have died are called *yuurei,* and they are often bound to earth for the purpose of revenge. Yet I saw nothing in those wretched spirits on the path that spoke to me of anger, or malice—at least not directed at the shrine. I still believe that they come here for comfort."

"Perhaps, but if you're right about Obaasan, there is at least one spirit that does not. Despite the fact that she waits for it at tea every day." Eli didn't speak for a moment. "Let's go see your grandmother," he said finally.

"All right."

Hiro turned to go, and Eli shut down the sensic and started to follow, when a flash of white in the shadowed woods caught his eye. Eli watched as a little girl made her way along a dirt path he hadn't noticed before, some distance to the east of the shrine. She was too far away for Eli to make out her face, but she was wearing a formal kimono of white, with sash and sandals to match. Her hair was bobbed short in a style Eli hadn't seen before. She carried another pair of plain straw sandals, of the old-fashioned sort that were still common in tourist shops along the coast. Eli looked back into the woods but there was no one with her. She walked the trail slowly, looking very solemn. Then she came to a small stone figure along the trail and very carefully placed the sandals by the image.

"Eli? What are you looking at?"

"A little girl. She's making an offering of some kind. I'm sorry, but something about it struck me as odd."

"Where? I don't see her."

Eli glanced at his friend and pointed back at the trail. "There."

"There's no one there, Eli."

Hiro was right. The trail was there, and the small statue, but there was no little girl in white or any other color to be seen. Eli wondered for just a moment if he was breaking some unwritten rule before he left the marked road and set off toward the trail, with Hiro close behind him.

The statue by the path was real enough. It was about two feet high, a little bald man with long, almost comical-looking ears. The sandals that Eli had seen the girl carry hung from a string around his neck. Eli stared at it for several long moments. "What is this?"

"It's *OJizou-sama,*" Hiro said. He sounded surprised. The ghosts had not rattled him. This little statue had.

"Who is he?"

Hiro looked thoughtful. "*Jizou* is an Enlightened Being, one who chose to stay behind to fulfill some worthy function in this world rather than pass into transcendence."

"That sounds more Buddhist than Shinto."

Hiro raised an eyebrow. "You've been studying, haven't you? Yes, it is Buddhist. The two work together in many ways, but I don't recall seeing this statue before."

"It's here now. So why would someone be offering sandals?"

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"*Jizou* is a protective deity in general, but he's mainly known as 'The God of Children.' He guides and cares for the spirits of departed children in their journey in the River of Souls. The dry stream bed is hard there, and full of stones. *Jizou* wears out many shoes in his work, so offerings of sandals are traditional. Also toys, clothes, things to help the little ones."

Eli considered. "May I touch the offering?" Hiro nodded and Eli carefully prodded one sandal with his finger, confirming its reality. He turned it over, and found a small inscription circled in red.

"It's a maker's mark," Hiro said, looking over his shoulder. "The Hinao family has made sandals of this type for hundreds of years."

There was a faint sound behind them, almost like a whisper. When he turned around, all Eli saw was the shrine proper and a few outbuildings behind it. One of them had a small porch and a sliding panel for a door. What he'd heard sounded a bit like a sliding door closing. Eli looked back down the path away from the shrine. As far as he could tell, it ended in trees and shadows. "Let's go see your grandmother," he repeated.

There was a ceremony in progress. Miss Tanaka, the shrine's elderly secretary, brought them through a side hall to Mrs. Yamada's rooms at the rear of the shrine. She reappeared only long enough to bring tea and then disappeared again. Eli still wasn't bending easily, but he was getting used to the mats. Hiro sat formally at the table, but he just stared at his tea, waiting.

Eli looked around.

It's as if I never left.

Eli had wondered how well he would remember this place, but it turned out that he didn't need to remember it at all. The calligraphed scrolls, the single *bonsai* by an eastern window, the delicate paper screens, even the small squares of handmade yellow paper Obaasan always had close to hand on her table were all in place, everything almost exactly as it had been when he met Mrs. Yamada on his first and only visit right after college. Even then, Eli had known that there were few places in Japan that still looked like this, unchanged in style and function for hundreds of years. He imagined there were fewer still, now.

"Eli, what are you doing?"

"Huh?"

Eli looked down. He'd picked up one of the small squares of paper without even thinking about it and begun to fold it as Obaasan had taught him long ago. He'd assumed that he'd forgotten how, but apparently his fingers remembered. He set the paper crane down on the table in front of him. It wasn't very good, but then his origami never had been.

"You need more practice, Mr. Mothersbaugh."

Kumiko Yamada entered the room. To say she looked older than Eli remembered wouldn't have been true. Old was a binary condition to him then, you either were or weren't, and Kumiko Yamada was then and was now. Her face was lined and she looked frail and small in her blue silk robes; there was a weariness in her eyes that almost frightened Eli. That said, she certainly did not *act* frail. Her iron-grey hair had been pulled back and braided like a warrior preparing for battle, plus she had a sheer *presence* that made the air in her small apartment fairly crackle, as if it were playing host to a coming storm.

If this lady ever becomes a ghost, you won't need a sensic to find her.

She served them more green tea; she expressed her pleasure at seeing Eli

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again. She asked about his health. She asked about his work at the Bureau. Talk was cordial and polite and nowhere near the point. After a while, Mrs. Yamada seemed to remember something.

"Grandson, Tanaka-san was having a problem with the shrine's phone charges. Would you check with her on the matter?"

"Now?"

"Since you're here, now would seem appropriate."

Hiro excused himself and hurried out with no more argument. Eli shot a wistful glance at his retreating friend.

"Now then, Eli," Mrs. Yamada said in perfect English, "We can talk freely for a moment. I know why you have come. I appreciate my grandson's concern, but it is pointless."

Eli chose his words with caution. "But not, as you were careful not to say, 'groundless'?"

Mrs. Yamada sipped her tea. "It changes nothing."

"Would it change anything if I told you I've seen the ghost?"

"I know what you have seen."

"You know. . . ? Ah. That *was* you I heard, wasn't it? Does the ghost come every day at that time?"

Mrs. Yamada didn't yield an inch. "You saw something you did not understand."

Eli persisted. "I understand some of it. The old-style white kimono, for one. Hiro said it's the type sometimes used for funeral rites. For another, even a very quick little girl couldn't have vanished during the time it took to move my head a bare ninety degrees. Can I prove any of this? No. My instrument wasn't reading. Yet I hardly think that matters. You are in some kind of difficulty. Why would you refuse help when it's offered? Yes, your grandson is concerned." Eli hesitated, then added, "As am I, Obaasan."

Mrs. Yamada's face was unreadable. "You are kind. And a clever young man, as I recall. Curious and quick to learn. I hope you are still, for there is something else you must learn now."

"What is that, Obaasan?"

"That I am an old woman, and not long for this world no matter what happens. How well I face my death is for me to choose. I will not say I am sorry you have come so far, for it was very good to see you once more. But believe me when I tell you there's nothing you can do."

Hiro returned shortly afterward, and they finished their tea in a haze of polite chatter. Later, Hiro gave Eli his promised tour of the shrine, and that, it appeared, was that.

Afterward, back at his apartment, Hiro was gloomily resigned as Eli told him what had happened. "The term 'stubborn' might have been invented for my grandmother, though it does not do her justice. I am truly sorry to have wasted your time."

Eli shook his head. "I'm not giving up just yet. There may be limits to what we can do, but that doesn't mean we can't do anything."

Hiro looked at him. "I'm listening."

"The fact that the apparition is a child may be significant. Your grandmother lost her family in the Second World War, didn't she? I need access to local records from that period. Can you help?"

"I'll try, but I understand there are very few. The firebombing at the end of that war destroyed almost everything; most date from the time of the Occupation and later."

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"It'll have to do. Also, though this may sound presumptuous, do you have any family albums?"

Hiro blinked. "Pictures? Certainly, and you're welcome to see them. Yet I have to ask: why?"

Eli didn't have much more to go on than instinct. A ghost was a pallid, frail thing most of the time and no danger to anyone. There were exceptions, but not many; Eli had a feeling that Mrs. Yamada knew that, yet she was terrified of *this* one. And the fact that Eli had been able to see it *without* his sensic made him wonder if, perhaps, her fear was more than justified.

"I don't know," Eli said, and he sighed. "I'm sorry; if I could explain it better I would."

"You have a suspicion," Hiro said.

Eli shrugged. "It's more of a question. I saw the ghost without the sensic, and that's unusual. It makes me wonder what sort of ghost we're looking for."

The next morning, Eli was back at the Shrine. Hiro had to report to work at the Ministry and Eli was a little relieved; one person fumbling in the dark seemed quite enough. He checked his watch. Almost time. There were a few visitors to the shrine this morning who were not ghosts; Eli got a few curious looks, but nothing more, as he moved off the path to stand some distance behind *Jizou,* his sensic tuned and ready.

The little girl appeared at the foot of the path.

She emerged suddenly from the tree shadows and Eli almost jumped, startled despite himself. He quickly looked away from the girl as he checked his readings. An even quicker glance at the main path showed that no one else was taking any notice of them. He looked back at his instrument and the look lengthened into a stare.

That can't be right!

There was a whisper of sound behind him, but he did not turn. He glanced from the sensic to the apparition, then back again, almost hoping for a change in either of them, but there was none. After a moment, Eli closed down his instruments and zipped the case. He just watched as the little girl came closer.

There was something in her hands today, too. Eli watched as she came closer, torn between his desire to see her better and his desire not to see her at all. He'd seen many ghosts in his work, but there was something very different about this one. It was all he could do to keep from stepping back and putting as much distance as he could between himself and what seemed to be merely a little girl.

She's carrying a doll.

That was what the girl had brought today. A little girl doll in a red-and-white polka-dotted kimono. She did not carry it as most little girls would, cradled in her arms or holding its hand. She carried it on the palms of both hands. An offering. She placed it at the base of *Jizou* and bowed. Then, for a moment, she looked up at the shrine. A feeling of black dread washed over Eli, so strong that it seemed to blot out the shrine's peaceful influence; for a moment, the sun went dark, as if blotted by clouds. In the distance, the forest beyond the path seemed on fire, and Eli coughed; the air was thick with smoke. In another instant, both the vision and the fear began to ebb. The apparition turned back down the path. Eli thought about going after it, but that was useless. Even if there had been a reason, even if he'd thought there

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was something, anything, he could do, he could not take a step. He did finally find his voice.

"What do you think she will bring tomorrow, Obaasan?"

She answered from the building behind him, where he'd known she was since hearing the *shoji* screen slide open. "A toy, probably, to aid in his work. Before you came she brought a cap. *OJizou-sama's* bald head gets cold, you know."

"A very thoughtful and pious ghost. What happens when she has given all that is right and proper?"

"I think you know. Go home, Eli-san," Mrs. Yamada said. Then, "Please."

Eli heard another whisper as the screen was carefully but firmly closed, but he didn't bother to look behind him. Instead, he walked down the path the way the girl had gone. He did not see her, which was probably the only reason he was able to follow. Now it seemed a pleasant trail through the woods and nothing more.

The path shortly ended at a place where some of the stones on the hillside were blackened and cracked under their moss as if by intense heat. Beyond that was a drainage channel beside a busy downtown street. There was a small stone footbridge over the channel, but it was nearly blocked by undergrowth and clearly had not been used in some time. Eli looked out into the modern city for a moment, trying without success to picture it as it might have looked in 1945. After a moment, he made his way back to the shrine.

Later, in Hiro's apartment, Eli wondered if there was anyone he could call. There was no one at the Bureau he could think of. A bit frustrated, Eli still felt honor-bound for his friend's sake not to contact either Saito or Nakamura. There had been a hint in one of Saito's last papers that might have been relevant had it, as Eli suspected, referred to a similar phenomenon. Now he couldn't find out; Eli's presence in Japan alone would raise questions he'd rather not answer.

Honor isn't always convenient.

He had made a stop at the Ministry office to keep an appointment Hiro had made for him, but the archivist could offer little help. The records were even scantier than Hiro had believed. Now Eli contented himself with looking through the Yamada family albums.

Most of the photographs dated from the late nineteen nineties and before. Hiro hadn't been much for photography after college, and apparently Hiro and his grandmother were all the family remaining. The pictures of his friend as a young man were amusing enough, but Eli quickly put them aside in favor of the older albums.

The last thing he examined wasn't an album, but a very old shoebox filled with curling photographs. There was writing on the backs of many of them, most of which he could not read.

"The period's right, at least."

He found photographs of soldiers in uniform, including one stern-looking man seated stiffly in a plain wooden chair. A pretty woman in formal kimono kneeled beside the chair, and a smiling little girl stood at the soldier's knee. The child's hair style looked very familiar. Eli looked at the picture for a long time, then put it aside. Deeper into the box he dug, until finally he came to a slightly larger photo of the same little girl standing beside another girl who looked to be the same age, and then another of the first little girl

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by herself. He stared at this one even longer, though his doubts by then had long since fled.

When Hiro returned from work, Eli didn't even wait for "good evening" as he held up the last picture he had found.

"Hiro, who is this child?" He waited impatiently, ready for whatever Hiro might have to tell him. Ready, that is, for anything except what Hiro did say.

"My grandmother, of course. As a little girl. Can you tell me what this is all about?"

Eli shook his head. "Not yet I can't. But I think my question has become a suspicion after all."

The next morning, Eli went to the shrine early, even before Hiro left for work. He went to the shrine entrance and stopped at the basin, using the water to cleanse his hands and mouth as Hiro had shown him two days before. Then he went inside and asked to see Mrs. Yamada. While he waited, he looked at the calligraphed scrolls and the delicate carvings on the supporting columns. As the time stretched into several minutes, Eli wondered if she would refuse. She did not. She came out of her apartments herself.

"Eli-san, there is nothing more to discuss."

"*Gomen nasai,* but I believe you are mistaken, Obaasan."

She raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"I know who your ghost is."

She shook her head. "You cannot."

"I didn't say it was possible, Obaasan. I said it was true."

She looked at him for a moment. Eli was careful not to turn away from her gaze.

"Come with me," she said, and that was all. She led the way back into her apartment at the rear of the shrine where a low table was already set out for tea.

"Please sit," she said. Eli managed as best he could while the old woman slowly lowered herself to her knees and slid the screen aside. It took Eli several long moments looking out into the trees to realize where he was.

"Good morning, *OJizou-sama,*" he said, when he finally noticed the statue.

The path still glistened from droplets of dew, caught in the morning light filtering through the trees. The table was set with two cups for tea, just as Miss Tanaka had said. It was only then that Mrs. Yamada brought another for Eli.

"This is where you wait for her every morning. I assume *OJizou-sama* was your idea."

"A delay, nothing more. I discovered I needed more time to get my affairs in order, but that's all done now. She will not come more than once more, I think."

"What was her name?"

Mrs. Yamada glared at him. "You said—"

Eli chose his words more carefully. "And I told you the truth—I did and I do know who she is. That's not the same thing."

Mrs. Yamada drank her tea. "Kozue. She was a friend of mine. My best friend. I killed her, as you must know."

"Records are sketchy. I'd appreciate it if you could fill in the details."

"It doesn't matter now."

Eli raised his own cup. "If that were so, you wouldn't have agreed to see

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me." He paused, then pressed on. "I presume to think after all this time you want to tell someone. I also presume that someone might be me."

"Indeed? Why is that?"

"For the same reason your grandson sought my help in the first place," Eli said simply, without elaborating.

Hiro's grandmother smiled so that every wrinkle on her face stood in sharp relief. "You are a careful man, Eli-san. Perhaps that is why I will tell you."

The ghost appeared at the foot of the path. Eli kept his nervousness out of his voice with difficulty. "I am listening."

"It was during the War. I was just a child, but I was not strong and I broke under the burden of lies."

"I don't understand." Eli sighed. He'd been saying that a lot.

"Simple: we were told we would not be bombed. We were. We were told that American cities were being bombed. They were not. We were told our fathers and brothers would bring home a glorious victory. Many did not come home at all. My brother did not. Now it was father's turn."

Eli started to say something about truth being the first casualty of war, but the platitude would not come. He kept silent. Obaasan watched the ghost getting closer; Eli could not tell which was the more patient.

"He was an old man, even when I was born; he was not able to fight! I was only five, but I knew that the soldiers lied and that the war was lost and that my father would die just as my brother had and that my mother and I would be alone."

"What happened to Kozue?" Eli regretted the question as soon as he'd spoken it, afraid he'd played his hand too far, but Mrs. Yamada didn't even blink.

"There was to be a ceremony at the barracks, with children of the soldiers' families dressed in their best kimonos. We were to thank the soldiers and send them off to victory with flowers and song. I would not go. No matter what my father threatened or how my mother pleaded, I would not. When the time came, I hid. Kozue's mother was dead and her father was in the army; she was staying with my family. She went in my place."

"That's when the city was firebombed, wasn't it?"

She nodded. "It had happened before, but this was worse. Their main target was the barracks, and my mother was there. My father. Kozue. She was the only one I ever saw again . . . for a little while. She made it back to the shrine, somehow. She walked through the fire, burned as she was, burned horribly. Her face . . . She came up the path. She made a sound. Not crying. Not like anything I've heard before or since, and then she fell right where *OJizou-sama* is now, calling my name. I screamed and ran from her. As if she were the monster then that she is now. I did that to her. I made her."

Eli nodded. "I think you are right, Obaasan."

She smiled weakly. "Well then," she said, finishing her tea. "At least you don't presume to argue from false hope. It was *my* place to die with my family, not Kozue's. I have had a good, long life but it did not belong to me. Now I must give it up to its rightful owner; I won't hide from her any more."

Eli watched for a moment as the apparition laid down one final offering: a toy soldier standing proudly at attention. Then she smiled with entirely too many pointed teeth, bowed to *OJizou-sama,* and walked right past him. They were out of time.

Eli put down his own empty cup. *All offerings are made. It's now or never.*

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"You were never hiding from Kozue. Kozue is not the ghost."

Mrs. Yamada's surprise actually pulled her sight from the little demon advancing on her. "*Masaka* . . . what are you talking about??"

Eli reached into the pocket of his shirt and pulled out an old photograph. He reached over the table and held it up, so that the ghost and the photograph were, in perspective, almost exactly the same size. "Look at her, Obaasan. Look very carefully."

"K-Kozue . . ."

"You may have forgotten what you looked like then. Maybe you *wanted* to forget, but whoever wrote the names on the back of those pictures certainly knew who was in them. That is not Kozue on the path, Obaasan. That is *you*."

For a long moment she stared at him, as did the ghost on the path, as if, for that one thought and moment, they were of the same mind.

Mrs. Yamada broke the spell. "I am not long for this world but I am certainly not a ghost!"

Eli shrugged. "Perhaps not, but you created something like one. What is it called? A spirit, yet not a ghost. Not the *yuurei* that your grandson told me about. Something else, something created, transformed. A bit of your soul, all of your guilt. An idea given form and purpose. That purpose being your own death."

"*Yokai*," Mrs. Yamada said, softly. "That's the word you're looking for. And not guilt, really. Shame. Even if no one else knew, I did."

"You blamed yourself, and you continued every day from then until now, and little by little, day by day, you made this dreadful thing, and you called it Kozue."

Mrs. Yamada looked into the small dark eyes of death, and she smiled. She looked almost proud. "Yes."

The pit of Eli's stomach grew cold; he could not believe what he was hearing. "You *knew*?"

She looked at him. "Always. Why did you think otherwise? Yet you got beyond the surface of the matter, for all your blundering. I am impressed."

Eli realized to his horror that Obaasan had been right all along—he *had* seen something he did not understand. Now he knew that all of his digging and cleverness, everything he had done and said, was not going to change a damn thing. He was too late. And he had been too late for a very long time.

Mrs. Yamada took pity on him and touched his hand, briefly. "Do not fret, Eli-san—there was no other way. I could not take my own life in atonement. As I said, it wasn't mine to take."

"I'm a fool. I thought I could make a difference. Obaasan, I'm so sorry."

"No need to apologize. You acted as a friend. And you did make a difference. I am grateful."

Eli blinked; his vision was getting blurry. "How? For what?"

"Just because I knew what I was doing didn't mean I wasn't afraid of what was to come. Afraid, and very much alone. Now, thanks to you, I am neither." She then spoke to the spirit on the path. "Just a little more, *Kozue-chan*. Just a little more."

There was nothing else to do but wait. Knowing what was about to happen brought responsibility with it, and Eli did not intend to shirk the burden he'd made for himself. He sat there beside the old woman and waited with her for death to arrive at its own slow pace.

Mrs. Yamada sighed. "I didn't tell my grandson because I wished to spare

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him this. I didn't tell you for much the same reason. Yet now that you are here, there is one small favor I must ask of you."

"Anything," Eli said, and meant it.

"Tell my grandson that I know why he would not marry, and I'm sorry I could not bring myself to tell him so before. Or to stop hounding him about it. He will understand. I think you do, too."

The apparition stood on the step. "*Ikimashou ka?*" it asked, in a small sweet voice very much like that of the child it was not. Obaasan took its small hand in hers.

"Yes, we *shall* go now, little one. Sorry to keep you waiting for so very long."

Eli stayed until the funeral rites were done. The day after that, Hiro saw Eli off at the train station for his ride back to Narita and the flight home.

"Perhaps this comes too late, but the ghost is at rest and will not return. What will you do now?"

Hiro shrugged. "I will take over management of the shrine, of course. As my grandmother wished. Perhaps I will marry and try to have a family before it's too late. She wished that, too. Let it not be said that Obaasan did not get her way in all things."

"She knew about you, Hiro. She was sorry she never told you, and made you pretend all these years. That was on her mind at the end."

Hiro looked surprised, but only a little. "There are always fewer secrets than one thinks. I'm sure Tomoko knows also, and yet she remains with me. Perhaps it must be her decision as well." Hiro bowed. "I am grateful for everything you have done."

"Since this wasn't a Bureau matter, there will be no record. I'll destroy the sensic data. We need not speak of it again."

After Hiro left, Eli changed his ticket to a later train and walked alone back to Yamada Shrine. He couldn't say why it was important to come here to do as he had promised, but it was before the statue of *OJizou-sama* that he kept his word. First, he erased all readings from the time index when he'd first arrived on the shrine's main path. Then he pulled out the printout of all his data on the creature called Kozue. It consisted of one long column of numbers.

All zeroes.

This he carefully folded into the best paper crane he had ever made, and placed it as an offering at *Jizou*'s feet. Eli had never thought of himself as a religious man. He still did not. Later, he would wonder what had moved him to perform this rite, but for now he needed no justification other than, within the understanding of that one moment, a sense of what needed to be done.

Eli clapped twice as he had seen Hiro do. Then he put his hands together and said a silent prayer on behalf of one more small soul given at last into the care of the God of Children. ○

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**In the holiday spirit,
Kage Baker gifts us with an eerie timeslip tale
and best wishes for a . . .**

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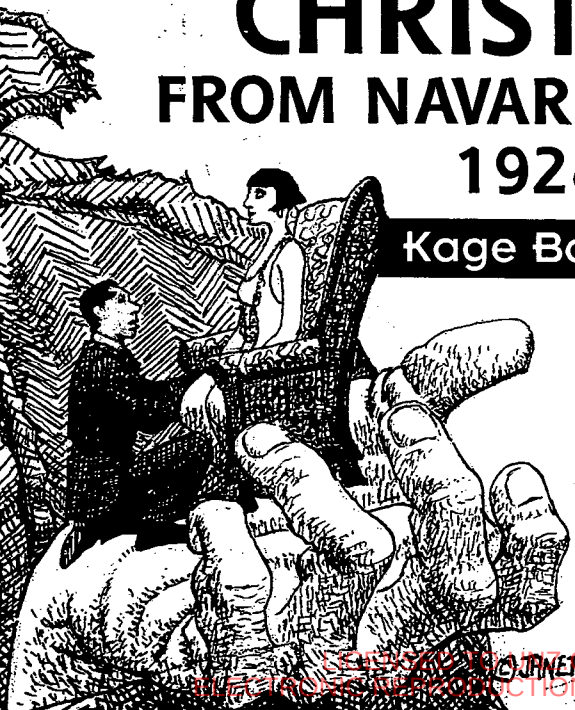
Illustration by Janet Aulisio

MERRY CHRISTMAS FROM NAVARRO LODGE, 1928

Kage Baker



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That Christmas Eve Dolliver found himself walking south on Highway 1, trying to hitchhike back to San Francisco, in a very unpleasant frame of mind.

He kept trying to find some reason, some pattern of events that had resulted in the present moment. He'd made one stupid decision about living off his unemployment for a while; had that been all it took to bring him here?

That had been all it took. As he trudged along the narrow two-lane above the cliffs Dolliver made another discovery: there wasn't much traffic along that road on Christmas Eve, and what there was wouldn't stop for somebody in a crappy old stained coat. All that long afternoon the sky got grayer and the passing cars got fewer and the dull cold penetrated more deeply into his bones.

It didn't help that the scenery was breathtaking, looming green redwood forests that breathed out a nice seasonal balsam fragrance. In the couple of cliff-perching little bed-and-breakfast towns Dolliver passed, people looked right through him, dressed as he was, though he made no attempt to beg for change. The dogs alone acknowledged his presence, barking and threatening; and the grandeur of the surf beating against the black cliffs began to lure him, as time and the miles went by. Only the thought that suicide during the holidays was a cliché kept him from jumping right over.

Pretty soon it got dark and Dolliver had all he could do to keep from wandering over the edge in the pitch-blackness. The only thing he had to orient himself was the sound of the sea and, miles out on an invisible horizon, the spark of light that was some fishing boat or tanker. He made up his mind to stay at the next little town if he had to break a window and get himself arrested.

He came around a high curve and saw a blaze of light. Following it to the edge of the road, he found himself looking down a hillside into a river gorge. There were buildings down there, where the river met the sea. Right below was the roof of a big gabled place. Painted on its slates in squared black letters, just visible by the reflection of the floodlights, were the words NAVARRO LODGE.

So he followed the road around and down, and found the turnoff from the highway: a gravel drive cutting away through the silver-barked alder trees, following the river bank. Then the gravel was lit up by headlights behind him, and Dolliver looked over his shoulder and had to scramble out of the way of the oncoming car.

He saw that it was an antique, something from the twenties maybe, beautifully restored. Somebody had money. He reflected that he should have let it hit him, and then he might have sued. He felt ashamed immediately, but reflected on the injustice of wealth and felt better.

Dolliver trudged on, beside the river that roared white over boulders, and a few hundred yards farther along he came out into the glow of the lights. There were the parked cars, lined up on the gravel; there were the lit windows of Navarro Lodge, each with its flickering red taper and festoon of evergreen. It was a rambling two-story building with dormer windows looking out on the river and the alder forest.

All the cars were antiques. Gleaming brass and chrome, bug-eyed headlights, green and black and mustard-yellow paint, leather trunks on the back. Oh, thought Dolliver, some classic car club's having a rally. How nice for them. His envy intensified.

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He paced along outside, indecisive about going in. Through the windows he could glimpse people moving—the car enthusiasts, probably, he thought, because they all seemed to be wearing costumes for the occasion. There was a smell of wood smoke sweet on the night air, a bite of frost, and how brilliant and chill the stars were! Dolliver could hear slightly drunken laughter and the tinny sound of what he guessed was a television. He could hear the crash of waves in the black winter night, dragging on the shingle beach. Distant on the horizon, the light from the ship was still there.

It occurred to Dolliver that if he took off his coat before he went in, he'd make a better impression, so he hung it on the low fence that ran along the driveway. The cold bit into him at once. Hugging his arms he sprinted up the front steps and shouldered through the doors, rehearsing what he'd made up to say, which was: *Excuse me, I'm afraid I've had something embarrassing happen. My lady friend and I were having an argument and she stopped the car and asked me to get out and look at the right front tire. When I got out, she drove off—she's got my coat, my wallet and all my credit cards, my cell phone—I wonder if I could throw myself on your mercy, since it's Christmas Eve? I'd be happy to sleep in the lobby—*

He went up to the desk, dark wood decorated for the holiday with swags of holly branches. There was a man there writing in a ledger. Dolliver cleared his throat and said, "Excuse me—"

The man didn't look up. Dolliver moved in closer and tried again. "Excuse me—"

Still, the man ignored him. He looked about twenty-five, wore a plain brown sweater over an oxford shirt, wore steel-rimmed glasses: nothing to tip Dolliver off that anything strange had happened, and after all people had been pretending they didn't see him all day.

What did seem weird was the fact that the man was writing in the ledger book using a long wooden pen with a steel nib, and dipping from a little fireplug-shaped bottle of Schaefer's Ink. No computer terminal, there on the desk. No telephone.

Dolliver stepped forward, put both hands flat on the desk and said, as loudly as he could, "EXCUSE ME!"

The man wrote on, with a calm and pleasant expression on his face, giving no acknowledgment Dolliver was there at all.

After a moment of staring Dolliver said huffily, "Well, fine then!" and drew himself up and marched into the main lobby.

There was a big fireplace in there, made of river cobbles, with a bright fire of alder and cottonwood logs. He went straight to it and warmed himself, and as he turned he prepared another speech: *Er—excuse me, but is the person at the counter hearing-impaired? I've been trying to get his attention....*

But as he looked out at the room, he knew.

The people in this room were also oblivious to his presence: a young girl with a powdered face and black pageboy bob sitting on a couch before the fire, right there in front of him, and a young man sitting beside her, leaning close and whispering intently in her ear. A couple of older gentlemen arguing under the deer's head mounted on the wall, as they drank from little glass punch cups. Another old man sitting in a Morris chair, reading a hardcover book and from time to time tipping cigar ash into the smoking stand, with its thick amber bowl.

Dolliver had seen enough movies and *Outer Limits* episodes to guess that he'd fallen into some kind of time slip. He wondered bitterly why he couldn't

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have been abducted by aliens, which at least would give him a story to sell to the tabloids.

The girl wore twenties flapper garb. The men might have stepped out of an old L.L. Bean catalogue, all hunter flannels. All the details of the room were perfect for the period too, the wainscoting in polished dark wood, the wallpaper with its sporting motif, the duck-hunting print patterns in which the chairs were upholstered. There was a little spruce Christmas tree in one corner with a string of old-style lights, thick mold-blown glass in shapes of fruits, painted in colors, the electrical cord wrapped in woven fabric.

A clock ticked on the mantel, which Dolliver only heard because he was standing right in front of it; otherwise it'd have been drowned out by the Victrola in the corner, on which a scratchy recording of *Adeste Fideles* was playing. He could see the old black phonograph record spinning, just as fast as a CD does now.

The song ended, and the girl jumped away from the young man and got up to change the record. She put on *The Saint Louis Blues* and amused herself by doing a little dance step alone, watching the young man from under her long lashes. She had a piquant little face, but her eyes were rather cold. The young man looked sad and stared into the fire, right through Dolliver's legs.

Interesting as this was, Dolliver was more intrigued by the smell of dinner coming from the dining room beyond. He crossed the room, drawing no attention to himself. One of the two men drinking punch was saying belligerently:

"Sure you could. Say, you could put a radio tower up on that hill that'd pull in China, and he's crazy if he doesn't do it. I told him . . ."

The dining room had the same sporting decor, except that there were small round tables here and there on the wide plank floor, and a buffet on the far wall. There were a few couples at the tables, girls in bright beaded gowns chatting gaily with more men in plaids and checks. Somebody's little fox terrier was wandering about begging. There was a stockbrokerish guy at the buffet, listening to a thin youth in a waiter's jacket who was affirming:

"Yes, sir, all our own. The salmon's smoked right up the hill in our smokehouse. And that's local venison, sir, and the roast beef too. No, sir, the plum pudding came out of a can, but . . ."

"Hell with the plum pudding," yelled another stockbrokerish type, bounding up with a cup of punch. "What's in this stuff? It's got plenty of pep, and I mean plenty!" He raised his cup and winked broadly.

"Applejack, what do you think?" said the other stockbroker. "They make their own in the cellar, don't they, kid?"

"Yes, sir. We have the apples brought over special from Sebastopol," agreed the youth.

"Well, say, I think I'll just take a room here permanently," chortled the drinker, and drank. "Hell with the Volstead Act!"

There was somebody else standing at the buffet too. He was helping himself, filling a plate with meat and some of the other fare that was laid out: asparagus, oysters, Stilton cheese and crackers, hot biscuits. He looked up, saw Dolliver and grinned.

"Hey, bro," he said, chewing. He wore blue jeans, a Metallica T-shirt, a down vest; John Deere cap and sneakers. He had a thin beard, long hair. Dolliver was wearing jeans and Nikes, which was presumably how this other person from the present recognized him for a fellow time-traveler.

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Dolliver stared, and the other man swallowed and said "Welcome to the Twilight Zone, huh? Doo-de-doo-doo, doo-de-doo-doo!"

"The food's real?" said Dolliver, but he was already crossing the room and reaching for one of the plates.

"Ghost food, I guess, huh? Tasty, though," said the other, stuffing a wad of sliced roast beef into his cheek. Dolliver picked up the plate, weighed it in his hand. It was substantial. There was a green pattern of alder cones and leaves around the rim, and the words NAVARRO LODGE in rustic letters. He took the plate and waved it slowly in front of the face of the nearest stockbroker, who never blinked; in front of the waiter, who never paused in his recitation: "... and the blackberries in the pie were picked right from our own brambles here, our cook makes all our preserves. ..."

"They ain't gonna see you," said the other. "Really. I've been here since this morning, and nobody's noticed me yet."

"But we can affect their reality," said Dolliver, picking up a sliver of turkey and tasting it experimentally. It was substantial too, and he was famished, so he set to piling food on his plate. "Their buffet's reality, anyway. What's going on?"

"Beats me, friend," said the other. "I figure it's one of those things like on TV. Jesus, don't you wish you had a camera? We could get on one of those programs and make a fortune." He chewed and swallowed and looked Dolliver up and down. "You hitchhiking, huh?"

"Yes," said Dolliver, betting the man lived in a trailer park.

"Where you from?"

"New York."

"Wow," said the other. He lifted a punch cup and drank with relish. "You should try this stuff. Smooth, man!"

"Okay," said Dolliver, spotting the wassail bowl. He filled a punch cup and had a sip. It burned all the way down. He set it carefully aside and began to eat, grimly and seriously, right where he was standing. He hadn't eaten in two days.

"I'm from Navarro, myself," said the other. "Back up the river. So, how'd you come to be here? Long way from home, huh?"

Dolliver introduced himself and told his story in all its humiliating detail: the company layoff, the unemployment error, the closed-out savings account, the eviction; then the ultimate finger from Fate, the old girlfriend who'd invited him out to spend Christmas with her. By the time Dolliver had blown his last cash on bus fare and got to Mendocino she'd made up with her husband and changed her mind about the invitation.

"Wow, man, that happened to me," said the other, looking delighted. "My old lady threw me out of the trailer this afternoon." Bingo, thought Dolliver. "This guy at the Christmas tree lot fucked with me about my bonus, so there was like—no money. I just started walking and wound up here. Verbal Sweet," he said, and Dolliver was mystified until the other extended his hand for a shake and he realized that Verbal Sweet was the man's name.

"Nice meeting you, Verbal," he said.

"You're a college grad, huh?" said Sweet.

Dolliver admitted he was, for all the good it was doing him now, and Sweet closed one eye and nodded shrewdly. "Bingo! I thought so, the way you talk."

Meanwhile the stockbrokers had sat down and begun to eat. The waiter sighed and folded his hands in front of him. Then he looked up sharply: the

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girl with the black pageboy bob had come in and was approaching the buffet, alone.

"Hello, Billy," she said, picking up a plate.

"I was wondering if you were even going to notice me," said the waiter quietly. He looked anguished.

"I've got a lot to say to you, actually, but this isn't the time," she said, glancing over her shoulder. She tilted her head, staring down with a coy expression at the platters of beef and venison, as though she couldn't make up her mind. She swung a finger to and fro over the dishes. The waiter's eyes widened.

"If you're going to insult me—"

"No." She looked up, and there was nothing playful about her now. "Don't take it like that. So much has happened, Billy. I've been thinking a great deal about this. If we could talk—"

The waiter had looked incredulous, but he glanced up into the room and then hissed: "What good will it do to talk *now?*" Out loud he said: "Yes, ma'am, that's a thirty-pound turkey. We had it in a pen behind the smokehouse. It's been fed apple mash, so the meat's very rich—"

"Helene." The other man, the one who'd been whispering in her ear, approached and put his hands on her shoulders. "Dear, I'm sorry. But this means an awful lot to Dad."

"Whoa! Lovers' triangle," said Sweet. "What do you want to bet she's cheating on him?"

Dolliver just shrugged and kept eating. The waiter stared straight ahead, expressionless and pale, as the girl sighed and leaned back against the other man. Her voice was querulous as she said: "What does it mean to *you*, Edgar?"

"Well, I—of course I want it too, you know that!" he said.

She just pursed her lips. Beef or venison?

"Dessert time," said Sweet happily, and served himself a piece of blackberry pie. "And you know what's over there at the bar? Honest-to-God French Champagne. I'm getting me a glass. You want any?"

"Sure," said Dolliver. "Thanks."

"Edgar, I don't care to discuss this right now," said the girl, stepping away and selecting the beef at last. Edgar said:

"All right. But think about Christmas, Helene. Think what it could be like in a couple of years. The little tree, a little stocking, toys. Wouldn't that be wonderful?"

"Sweets to the sweet," she said cryptically, and the man smiled. The waiter coughed and excused himself, fleeing through a side door into what was probably the kitchen.

"Here you go," said Sweet, returning from the bar. He handed Dolliver a glass of champagne. Dolliver set down his plate and drank gratefully. Sweet looked furtive and raised two fingers to his lips, miming smoking a joint. He said,

"So, uh, you got any—?" Dolliver stared a moment before he got it.

"Oh! No, sorry."

"Damn. Well, okay. Maybe it's not a good idea to get too messed up, what with us being here and all. We might slip through a time warp or something and I ain't in any hurry to go back yet, are you?"

Dolliver set down his glass and reached into the fruit bowl for an orange. He said, "Not especially. It's not as though I've got anything I'd miss."

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"Me either," said Sweet. "But it's kind of a shame we're invisible."

"We were already invisible!" Dolliver snapped. "You think anyone back in our own time sees people like you and me? Even at this time of year? A run of bad luck and a dirty coat makes you a phantom, man."

Sweet listened patiently to his tirade and then went on: "Yeah, but wouldn't it be great if we could wow everybody with computers or something? We could, like, invent TV ahead of its time and get rich."

"Do you know how to make a television set?" Dolliver asked him. Sweet's face fell.

"No."

"Then that wouldn't work, see? But you could buy stock that'll do well," said Dolliver. "Like International Business Machines."

Sweet looked blank. Dolliver tried again:

"Or Coca-Cola, for example."

"Oh, yeah," exclaimed Sweet. He warbled a few bars of the latest Coke jingle, then frowned. "Wait a minute, you mean like the stock market? Oh, no way. You can lose money like that, I always heard. But I got an idea. If this goes on—" At this moment the two men who'd been arguing about radio reception came to the buffet and shouldered Dolliver aside, completely unconscious of his presence.

"No, it was the damnedest thing you ever saw," said one of them, setting down his punch cup and reaching for a plate. "Why, it was nothing like the movies, and all in color, too. But you'd need a lot more than a radio tower for reception, yes, *sir!*"

"The fellow's name was Baird, you say?" inquired the other. "Say, this could be big! I wonder if he's looking for investors over there?"

"Let's go back to the fireplace," suggested Sweet, and he and Dolliver took their desserts and drinks and went in to sprawl on the sofa.

"Here's what we do," said Sweet, forking blackberries into his mouth. "We go upstairs to the rooms where everybody's suitcases are, right? And we help ourselves to whatever they got, same as we did with the food."

"Steal?" Dolliver stopped peeling the orange. He thought about it a moment and slowly his hands started moving again. "Why not? They're all a bunch of useless boozers, and dead anyway—I mean, by our time. If they didn't notice the food disappearing, maybe they wouldn't miss jewelry. If they've got any."

"All these rich people?" Sweet looked scornful. "Of course they got jewelry with 'em. Didn't you ever watch any old movies? Ladies used to wear necklaces and stuff a lot more than now. And they'll have cash, too."

"No good," Dolliver told him, having another sip of champagne. "All their cash would be the big old Federal Notes." Sweet frowned at him in incomprehension and just at that moment one of the stockbrokers came to stand in front of them, warming his hands at the fire. "I'll show you," said Dolliver, and feeling absurdly pleased with himself he leaned forward and slipped the man's wallet from his pocket.

"Smooth," laughed Sweet, applauding. Dolliver opened the wallet and fanned the outsized bills. Sweet winced and shook his head.

"That's the weirdest thing I've ever seen, man."

"See? We couldn't spend it in our time without a lot of questions," Dolliver told him, putting the wallet back. "We could sell jewelry, though. If they've got any."

The stockbroker moved away and Edgar came alone to stand in his place,

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facing out into the room. After a moment he drew from his pocket a red leather case and opened it, staring inside.

"What did I tell you?" Sweet nudged Dolliver. "Jewels! You're so fast with your hands, see can you get it."

"All right." Dolliver drained his glass and stood. Flexing his hands theatrically, he waited until Edgar had slipped the case back into his pocket, sighing; then he slipped the case out again. Edgar remained standing there, staring through him unnervingly as he sat down again and opened the case.

"Diamonds or something," Sweet pronounced, leaning over to see. "Not bad!"

"Maybe it's a Christmas present," said Dolliver, looking up guiltily at Edgar's tense face.

"Well, Merry Christmas to you and me," Sweet replied. "We're both down on our luck a lot worse than these dudes will ever be. So... I guess we're splitting fifty-fifty on this?" He put out his hand and took the necklace from the box, and held it up to the firelight. It winked and threw lights on the wall.

"Sure," Dolliver told him. "Assuming we ever go back to our own time and aren't stuck here like ghosts." He closed the empty case and slipped it back into Edgar's pocket.

"Oh. Well, we could take one of their cars, if we can find some keys," said Sweet.

"We could," Dolliver agreed, "but we couldn't drive away from the past, you see? Just away from this lodge. And even if we managed to take a Packard or a Model T back with us, how would we handle the registration, once we were there?"

"Frigging DMV," Sweet conceded with a sigh, tucking the necklace away inside his vest. "Well, if we never go back, this isn't too bad." He eyed the couples who were leaving the dining room. One of the flappers cranked up the Victrola again and all the younger couples began to dance to a fox trot. One girl tugged an older man to his feet and he cut a few awkward capers. Sweet leaned over and nudged Dolliver. "Hey, wonder if the women are like the buffet? D'you think?"

Dolliver just looked at him a minute and then said, "You'd better be careful. How'd you like to get a dose of something when there's no penicillin yet?"

"There isn't?" Sweet was horrified. "Jesus, what'd people do?"

"Gee, Mr. Wallace, you'd better get a monkey gland," cried the girl gaily, as the wheezing stockbroker retreated from the dance floor.

"Suffered a lot," said Dolliver, standing up. "Come on, let's see what's upstairs."

There was a single red candle burning in the window on the landing, and they took it with them, since the second story did not appear to be wired for electricity. Most of the doors were unlocked. Dolliver and Sweet prowled through the dark rooms and found trunks and suitcases alone that would fetch a nice price in antique stores, plastered as they were with steamer and hotel labels. There wasn't quite the fortune in jewels Sweet had been hoping to find, but they did manage to pilfer a nice little haul in cufflinks and one tie tack with what Dolliver was fairly sure was a diamond on it. There were a couple of art deco brooches and a couple of bracelets of indeterminate value.

"Well, this sucks," complained Sweet as they clumped back downstairs,

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and the scratchy melody of *Am I Blue* floated up to meet them. One of the younger men was yodeling drunkenly along. Sweet turned on the stairs, eyes brightening. "But you know what? If we take one of the cars we can drive down to San Francisco, rob a bank or a jewelry store! Huh? Nobody'd see us."

"You've got a point there," said Dolliver, deciding not to argue with him.

They settled on the couch again, now and then rising to revisit the buffet. The evening wore on and the young people Charlestoned and shimmied in the glow of the Christmas lights. The older men sat at the edges and talked interminably about the stock market, about Herbert Hoover, about the trouble brewing again among the Serbs and Croats, about surf and stream fishing, about the big breakfast they'd have in the morning.

Everybody drank the Christmas wassail and, when that gave out, drank bootleg booze from flasks they'd brought with them. Dolliver was appalled at the cheerful and reckless way they mixed their liquors, to say nothing of the quantities they seemed to be able to drink without passing out. The dancing just got a little clumsier, the laughter of the girls got louder and shriller; and when *Stille Nacht* was played, with Madame Schumann-Heink crooning tenderly, people wept. At last in ones and twos they began to wander up the narrow staircase to their rooms.

The girl with the black pageboy bob did not drink much, or dance either. She came and sat on the couch by herself, between Dolliver and Sweet, who looked on bemused as Edgar came to crouch beside her.

"Helene, we don't have to live with them," he said quietly.

"Who?" wondered Sweet.

"In-laws, probably," Dolliver told him.

"You haven't got the spine to tell him no," said Helene matter-of-factly, not taking her eyes from the fire. Edgar stiffened and rose again, and left the room.

"Edgar isn't doing very well," remarked Dolliver, yawning. Sweet chuckled, watching Helene, and patted his knee.

"You can come sit on my lap, honey, I'll give you good advice. You don't want to marry that wienie. Marry the other guy, okay? The poor one. Billy."

"Here he comes," Dolliver observed, as Billy came in to build up the fire. He avoided making eye contact with Helene, but she leaned forward.

"You look nice in that jacket," she said.

"It's a waiter's jacket," he snapped. "I'm nobody and I'm going nowhere, remember? Not back east. Not to Europe. Not to Stanford or an office in the City."

Helene put her head in her hands. "All right. But you could do more for yourself, Billy. I know you could. You have the inner strength."

"Strength doesn't matter," Billy replied stonily. "Money matters, Helene. You taught me that well enough."

"Strength matters more than I'd ever imagined," she said, with the suggestion of tears in her voice. He turned in the firelight to stare at her, and his hand opened and he seemed about to reach out; but she looked sidelong at him from under her lashes with those cold eyes, and something about the look made him draw back his hand.

"Crying?" he said. "Or acting, Helene? It would take a lot more than a few tears for me to ever make a fool of myself again. I've got some pride, you know."

"You tell her, bro," said Sweet, slapping his leg.

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Edgar had finally re-entered the room. Billy shut his mouth like a trap and turned away from the fire as though Helene weren't there.

"Is everything satisfactory, mister?" he inquired of Edgar, in an excessively servile tone. Edgar just nodded miserably. "Good. Wonderful," said Billy, sounding as though he were about to cry himself. He stalked from the room.

Edgar approached the girl hesitantly.

"Hey!" Sweet stood up. "I know why there's no jewelry in the rooms. It'd be in the hotel safe."

"You think a place like this has one?" said Dolliver, but he got to his feet too. They paced swiftly into the front lobby, as Edgar knelt beside Helene and began to murmur to her in a hesitant voice.

The desk clerk was no longer there, but a quick search behind the desk failed to turn up anything resembling a safe. Sweet got down on his hands and knees to thump the baseboard paneling. Dolliver's attention was drawn by the open ledger, and he paused to examine the list of registered guests.

"Unless maybe it's behind a painting or something, I seen that in movies too—" Sweet was saying, when he heard Dolliver mutter an exclamation. He scrambled up.

"What?" he said. Dolliver didn't answer, so he read over his shoulder. A moment later he caught his breath and pointed a trembling finger at the third entry in the column.

"Shit! Look at that," he croaked.

Mr. Edgar V. Sweet, Palo Alto, California. The next entry was *Miss Helene Thistlewhite, Santa Rosa, California.*

"Same last name," observed Dolliver.

"No! That was my grandfather's name!"

"Uh—" Dolliver blinked at it. "Then—Helene is, what, your grandmother? Which would explain what you're doing here. Maybe. If Helene breaks up with him tonight—"

"I'll never get born," said Sweet. "Oh, my God!"

He turned and bolted into the main lobby, and Dolliver went after him.

There was Edgar, still on his knees, offering the small leather case and saying,

"I swear that's not an empty promise. Merry Christmas, Helene."

"No," cried Sweet, starting forward. Helene, smiling in spite of herself, took the case and opened it. She saw nothing but white silk lining inside. She lifted her eyes to Edgar with a look of flaming contempt.

In that moment, Sweet disappeared. One second he was there, looking on in horror, and the next he was gone. The diamond necklace that had been in his pocket dropped softly to the carpet runner and lay coiled there like a bright snake. Dolliver turned white. For the first time since arriving there he was frightened.

"Not an empty promise?" said Helene with a tight smile. Edgar gaped at the open case a moment before beating frantically at his pockets, and then getting down on hands and knees to peer under the couch.

"Helene, I swear—" he choked. "There was a necklace in there!" He jumped up and started out for the front lobby. Dolliver hesitated a moment before bending quickly to scoop up the necklace and drop it into his own pocket.

"Oh, oh, Lord—" Edgar swept the carpet runner with a desperate stare, and ran to the desk and hammered on the bell. "Oh, jiminy crickets, Helene, it's got to be here—I'll get the staff to help me look—"

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"Whatever you like, Edgar," said Helene. "I'm going to go have a cup of coffee. Let me know when you manage to get something right."

There was quite a commotion for a while, as the desk clerk and a couple of waiters—though not Billy—came out and helped Edgar search. Dolliver slunk away to the dining room, where he sat shivering. Helene was not in the dining room. After a while the commotion died down and Edgar went upstairs. Dolliver went back to the main lobby and sank down on the couch, before the fire that was going down to coals. He knew where Helene was, and what she was doing.

A waiter—again, not Billy—made a pass through the room, collecting coffee cups and dessert plates the guests had left. A few minutes later the man in the brown sweater came through, turning out the lamps and blowing out the candles. The surf beat loud on the shingle beach in the night.

Dolliver didn't think he'd ever sleep again after that, but he did doze off sometime before sunrise. When he awoke he was freezing cold and stiff, and sitting up found himself lying on the bare floor of a ruin, as he had half expected. The fireplace was black and yawning, the floor creaking, filthy. There was trash piled in the corners. Blackberry brambles choked the windows. He ran outside and his coat at least was okay, right where he'd left it; but the cars were long gone, the road overgrown, the upstairs gable windows black and staring.

Dolliver shrugged into his coat and went his way.

He pawned one of the brooches in San Francisco and got enough money to buy himself a suit, so he could sell the rest of the jewelry without drawing undue attention to himself. Within a week he'd found a job, which was ironic because his need wasn't desperate now; the necklace alone had brought enough to set him up nicely.

He still felt guilty, though he told himself that neither he nor Sweet could have affected the outcome that night in 1928. It hadn't been his decision. It hadn't been anyone's decision but Helene Thistlewhite's, ever, and she had decided to break her engagement to a young stockbroker and run off with Eustace William Dolliver; or so the family legend went. O

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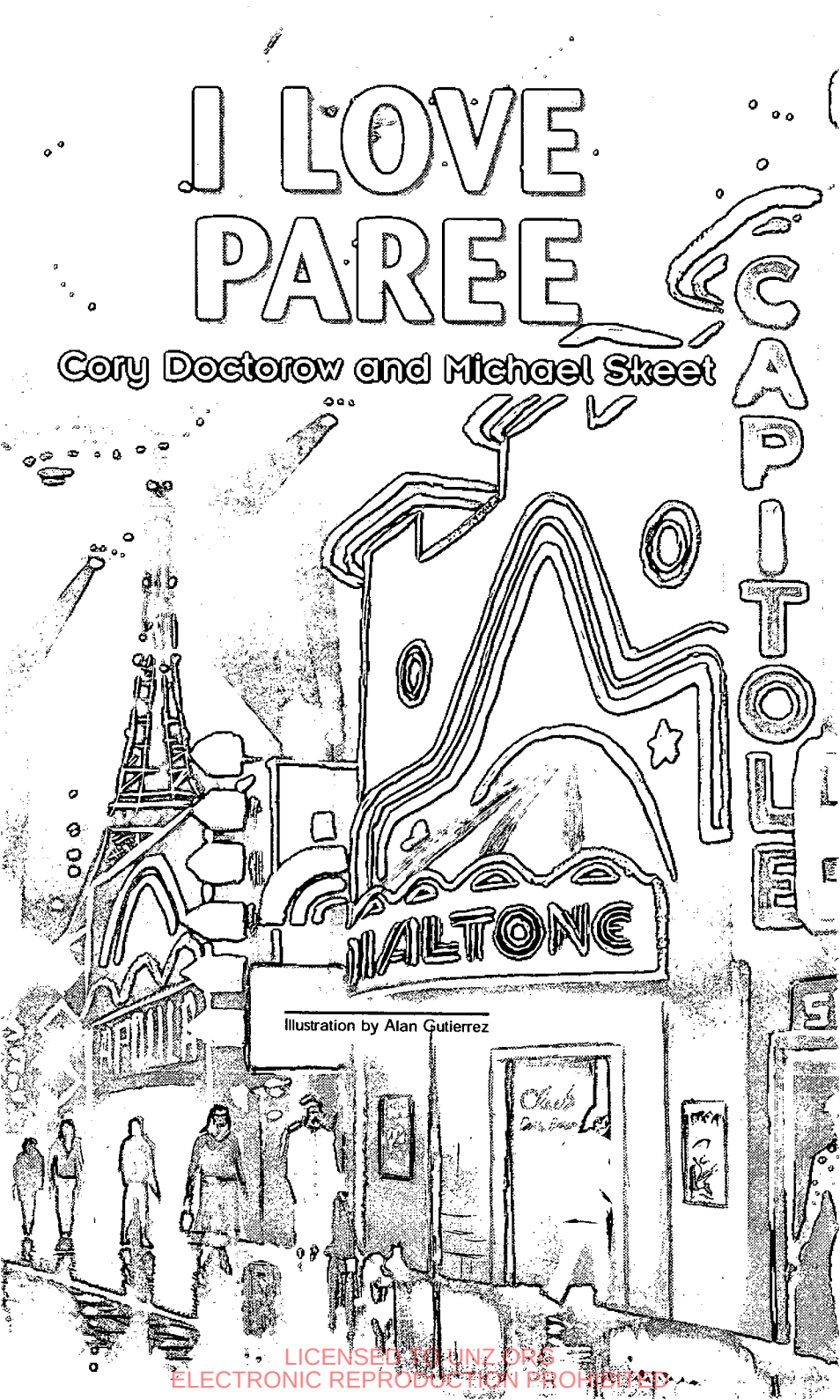
I LOVE PAREE

Cory Doctorow and Michael Skeet



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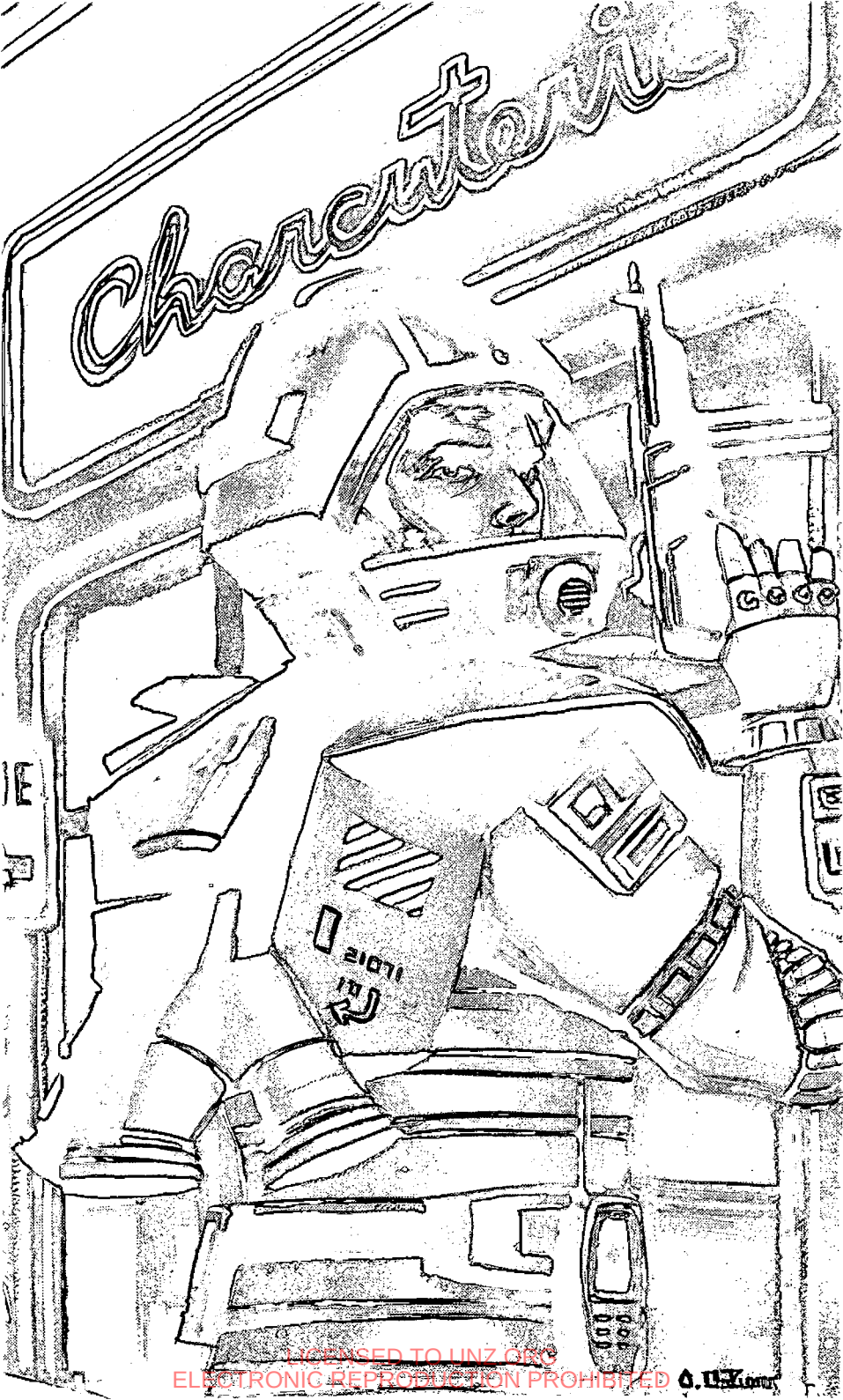

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Michael Skeet is a writer and broadcaster. He lives in Toronto, Ontario, with his wife, an SF librarian. Mr. Skeet is a two-time winner of Canada's Aurora Award, and is looking forward to visiting Paris again in the near future. This story is his first for *Asimov's*.

Cory Doctorow (*www.craphound.com*) has published numerous stories in *Asimov's, Amazing, SF Age, Interzone, Realms of Fantasy,* and elsewhere. He is a finalist for the 2000 Campbell Award for Best New Writer, and is the co-author (with Karl Schroeder) of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Publishing Science Fiction.* He also lives in Toronto, where he is CIO of a software company.

Day 1: The Night the Lights Went out in Dialtone

Gay Paree was in full swing when the Libertines conscripted the trustafarians. Me, I should have seen it coming. After all, that's what I do.

I was an OPH—Old Paree Hand—there before the Communards raised their barricades; there before the Boul' Disney became a trustafarian chill-zone; a creaking antique expat who liked his café and croissant and the *Herald Tribune* crossword in the morning. I loved Paree, loved the way I could stay plugged into everything while soaking in the warm bath of centuries. I loved the feeling of being part of a special club; we OPHs always managed to look out for one another, always managed to find the time to play at baseball in the Bois de Boulogne when the weather was good. Not even civil war had been able to change that, and that I loved about Paree most of all.

Normalment, I would've been in bed when the Club Dialtone was raided. But that night, I was entertaining Sissy, a cousin come from Toronto for a wild weekend, and Sissy wanted to see the famèd Dialtone. So we duded up—me in rumpled whites and hiking boots with calculated amounts of scuff; Sissy in po-mo Empire dress and PVC bolero jacket and a round bowler hat and plume—and we sauntered over the epoxy-resin cobbles to the Dialtone.

I played it for all it was worth, taking Sissy past the memorial crater arrondissements, along the echoing locks on the Seine where the sounds of distant small-arms fire ricocheted off the tile and whizzed over your head, past the eternal flame burning in the smashed storefront of the Burger King flagship store, and finally to the Dialtone.

Fat Eddie was bouncing that night, and I waggled my eyebrows at him surreptitiously, then at Sissy, and he caught on. "Mr. Rosen," he said, parting the crowd with a beefy forearm, "an unexpected pleasure. How have you been?"

Sissy's eyes lit up Christmas, and her grip on my elbow tightened. "You know, Edward: just the same, all the time. A little poorer with every passing day, a little older, a little uglier. Life goes on."

Fat Eddie smiled like the Buddha and waved aside my remarks with an expansive sweep of his arm. "You merely improve with age, my friend. This is Paree, m'ser, where we venerate our elder statesmen. Please, who is this lovely young woman with you?"

"Sissy Black, Edward Moreno. Sissy is my cousin, here for a visit."

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Fat Eddie took Sissy's hand in his meaty paw and feinted a kiss at it. "A pleasure, m'dam'selle. If there is anything we can do for you here at the Club Dialtone, anything at all, don't hesitate to ask."

Sissy flushed in the gaudy neon light, and shot a glance over her shoulder at the poor plebes stuck behind the velvet rope until Fat Eddie deigned to notice them. "Nice to meet you, Edward," she managed, after a brief stammer, and kissed him on both cheeks. This is a trustafarian thing, something she'd seen on the tube, but she did it gamely, standing on tiptoe. Not Fat Eddie's style at all, but he's a pro, and he took it like one.

He opened the door and swept her inside. I hung back. "Thanks, Eddie; I owe you one."

"You don't think I laid it on too thick?" he asked, rubbing at the lipstick on his cheeks with a steri-wipe.

I rolled my eyes. "Always. But Sissy impresses easily."

"Not like us, huh, Lee?

"Not like us." I'd met Eddie playing dominoes on Montmartre with five frères, and he'd been winning. It could've gotten ugly, but I knew the frères' CO, and I sorted it, then took Eddie out and got him bombed on ouzo at a Greek place I knew, and he'd been a stand-up guy for me ever since.

"Everything cool tonight?"

"Lotsa uniforms, but nothing special. Have a good time."

I walked inside and paused in the doorway to light a stinking Gitane, something to run interference on the clouds of perfume. Sissy was waiting nervously by the entrance, staring around her while trying not to. The kids were all out, in trustafarian rags and finery, shaking their firm booties and knocking back stupid cocktails in between sets. "What you think?" I shouted into her ear.

"Lee, it's supe-dupe!" she shouted back.

"You want a drink?"

"Okay."

The bartender already had a Manhattan waiting for me. I held up two fingers, and he quickly built a second for Sissy, with a cherry. I unfolded some ringgits and passed them across the bar. He did a quick check on the scrolling currency exchange ticker beneath the bar, and passed me back a clattering handful of Communard francs. I pushed them back at him—who needed more play-money?

I guided Sissy past a couple of stone-faced frères to an empty booth near the back, and took her jacket from her and put it on the bench next to me. She took a sip of her Manhattan and made a face. Good. If I kept feeding her booze she didn't like, she wouldn't knock back so much of it that I had to carry her out.

"It's *amazing,*" she shouted.

"You like it?"

"Yeah! I can't believe I'm really *here!* God, Lee, you're the best!"

I don't take compliments well. "Sure, whatever. Why don't you dance?"

It was all she needed. She tossed her bowler down on the table and tore off to the dance floor. I lost sight of her after a moment, but didn't worry. The Dialtone was a pretty safe place, especially with Fat Eddie making sure no smooth-talking trustafarian tried to take her back to his flat.

I sipped my drink and looked around. There were a lot of uniforms, as Eddie had mentioned—and as many here at the back of the club as up near the door. Libertines didn't come up to the Boul' Disney often. Too busy being

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serious Communards, sharing and fighting and not washing enough for my taste. Still, it wasn't unheard-of for a few of the frères to slum it up here where the richies played at bohemian.

These ones were hardcases, toughened streetfighters. One of them turned in profile and I caught his earrings—these whackos wear 'em like medals—and was impressed. Pierre was a major veteran, twenty confirmed kills and the battle of Versailles to boot. I began to think about leaving; my spidey-sense was tingling.

I shoulda left. I didn't. Sissy was having a wonderful time, kept skipping back, and after the second Manhattan, she switched to still water (no fizzy water for her, it makes cellulite, apparently). I was chewing on a tricky work-problem and working on my reserve pack of Gitanes when it all went down.

The sound system died.

The lights came full up.

Fat Eddie came tumbling through the door, tossed like a rag doll, and he barely managed to roll with the fall.

A guy in power-armor followed Fat Eddie in, leaving dents in the floor as he went.

Throughout the club, the frères stood and folded their arms across their chests. I gave myself a mental kick. I shoulda seen it coming; normalment, the frères stick together in dour, puritanical clumps, but tonight they'd been spread throughout the place, and I'd been too wrapped up to notice the change in pattern. I tried to spot Fat Eddie out of the corner of my eye without taking my attention away from the frères. At first I couldn't see him at all; then he turned up, looking dazed, in front of the door to the Dialtone's aged, semi-functional kitchen. For a moment I turned to look at him. He gave me a worried smile, touched his finger to his nose and faded through the door. A second later a frère moved in to block the kitchen, standing in front of the door through which Fat Eddie had just vanished. I wished I knew how to roll with the punches the way Fat Eddie did.

The PA on the power-armor crackled to life, amplifying the voice of the Pierre inside to teeth-shaking booms: "M'sers and M'dames, your attention please." Power-armor had a pretty good accent, just enough coq au vin to charm the ladies.

A trustafarian with a floppy red rooster's crest of hair made a break for the fire door, and a beefy frère casually backhanded him as he ran, sending him sprawling. He stayed down. Someone screamed, and then there was screaming all around me.

Power-armor fired a round into the ceiling, sending plaster skittering over his suit. The screaming stopped. The PA thundered again. "Your attention, *please*. These premises are nationalized by order of the Pro-Tem Revolutionary Authority of the Sovereign Paris Commune. You are all required to present yourselves at the third precinct recruitment center, where your fitness for revolutionary service will be evaluated. As a convenience, the Pro-Tem Revolutionary Authority of the Sovereign Paris Commune has arranged for transport to the recruitment center. You will form an orderly single-file queue and proceed onto the buses waiting outside. Please form a queue now."

My mind was racing, my heart was in my throat, and my Gitane had rolled off the table and was cooking its way through the floor. I didn't dare make a grab for it, in case one of the frères got the idea that I was maybe

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going for a weapon. I managed to spot Sissy, frozen in place on the dance floor, but looking around, taking it in, thinking. The trustafarians milled toward the door in a rush. I took advantage of the confusion to make my way over to her, holding her hat and jacket. I grabbed her elbow and steered her toward Power-armor.

"M'ser," I said. "Please, a moment." I spoke in my best French, the stuff I keep in reserve for meetings with snooty Swiss bastards who are paying me too much money.

Power-armor sized me up, thought about it, then unlatched the telephone handset from his chest-plate. I brought it up to my ear.

"What is it?"

"Look, this girl, she's my mother's niece, she's only been here for a day. She's young, she's scared."

"They're all young. They're all scared."

"But she's not like these kids—she's just passing through. Has a ticket from Orly tomorrow morning. Let me take her home. I give you my word of honor that I'll present myself at the recruitment station—" the hell I would "—first thing in the morning. As soon as I see her off—"

I was interrupted by the frère's laughter, echoing weirdly in his armor. "Of course you will, m'ser, of course. No, I'm sorry, I really must insist."

"My name is Lee Rosen. I'm a personal friend of Commandant Ledoit. Radio him. He'll confirm that I'm telling the truth."

"If I radioed the Commandant at 0300h, it would go very hard on me, M'ser. My hands are tied. Perhaps in the morning, someone will arrange an appointment for you."

"I don't suppose you'd be interested in a bribe?"

"No, I don't really think so. My orders were very strict. Everyone in the club to the recruitment center. Don't worry, m'ser. It will be fine. It's a glorious time to be in Paree."

There was a click as he shut off the phone, and I racked it just as the PA reactivated, deafening me. "Quickly, my friends, quickly! The sooner you board the bus, the sooner it will all be sorted out."

Sissy was staring hard at the confusion with grave misgivings. She clutched my shoulder with white knuckles. "It'll be all right, don't worry!" I shouted at her. "It's a glorious time to be in Paree," I muttered to myself.

Best not to describe the bus-ride to the recruitment center in too much detail. They packed us like cattle, and some of the more dosed trustafarians freaked out, and at least one tried to pick my pocket. I held Sissy tight to my chest, her hat and jacket squashed between us, and murmured soothing noises at her. Sissy was fallen silent, shaking into my chest.

A hundred years later, the bus rolled to a stop, and a hundred years after that, the doors hissed open and the trustafarians tumbled out. I waited until the rush was over, then led Sissy off the bus.

"What's going on, Lee?" she said, finally. She had a look that I recognized—it was the cogitation face I got when I started chewing on a work-problem.

"Looks like the frères have decided to draft some new recruits. Don't worry. I'll get it sorted out. We'll be out of here before you know it."

A group of frères was herding the crowd through two doors: the women on one side, the men on the other. One of them moved to separate Sissy from me.

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"Friend, please," I said. "She's scared. She's my mother's niece. I have to take care of her. Please. I'd like to see the CO. Commandant Ledoit is a friend of mine, he'll sort it out."

Pierre made like he didn't hear. I didn't bother offering him a bribe; a grunt like this would like-as-not take all your money and then pretend like he'd never seen your face. The ones in the power-armor were the elite, with some shred of decency. These guys were retarded sadists.

He simply pulled Sissy by the arm until we were separated, then shoved her into the women's line. I sighed and comforted myself with the fact that at least he hadn't kicked me in the nuts for mouthing off. The women were marched around the corner—to what? They had their own entrance? Sissy vanished.

It took an effort of will to keep from smoking while I queued, but I had a sense that maybe I'd be here a long time, and should hold onto them. A shuffling eternity later, I was facing a sergeant in a crisp uniform, his jaw shaved blue, his manner professionally alert. "*Bon soir,*" he said.

On impulse, I decided to pretend that I didn't speak French. I needed any leverage I could get. You learn that in my line of work. "Uh, hi."

"Your name, m'ser?" He had a wireless clipboard whose logo-marks told me it had been liberated from the Wal-Mart on the Champs Elysées.

"Lee Rosen."

He scrawled quickly on the board. "Nationality?"

"Canadian."

"Residence?"

"30, rue Texas, No. 33."

The sergeant smiled. "The Trustafarian Quarter."

"Yes, that's right."

"And you, are you a trustafarian?"

I was wearing a white linen suit, my hair was short and neat, and I was in my early thirties. No point in insulting his intelligence. "No, sir."

"Ah," he said, as though I had made a particularly intelligent riposte.

The hint of a smile played over his lips. I decided that maybe I liked this guy. He had style.

"I'm a researcher. A freelance researcher."

"Jean-Marc, bring a chair," he said in French. I pretended to be surprised when the goon at the door dropped a beautiful chrome-inlaid oak chair beside me. The sergeant gestured and I sat. "A researcher? What sort of research do you do, M'ser Rosen?"

"Corporate research."

"Ah," he said again. He smiled beneficently at me and picked up a pack of Marlboros from his desk, offered one to me.

I took it and puffed it alight, and pretended to be calm. "I haven't seen an American cigarette my whole time in Paris."

"There are certain . . . advantages to serving in the Pro-Tem Authority." He took a deep drag. He smiled again at me. Fatherly. Man, he was good.

"Tell me, what is it that you are called upon to research, in your duties as a freelance corporate researcher?"

What the hell. It was bound to come out eventually. "I work in competitive intelligence."

"Ah," he said. "I see. Espionage."

"Not really."

He raised an eyebrow dubiously.

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"I mean it. I don't crouch in bushes with a camera or tap phones. I analyze patterns."

"Yes? Patterns? Please, go on."

I'd polished this speech on a million uncomprehending relatives, so I switched to autopilot. "Say I manufacture soap. Say you're my competition. Your head office is in Koniz, and your manufacturing is outsourced to a subcontractor in Azerbaijan. I want to stay on top of what you do, so I spend a certain amount of time every week looking at new listings in Koniz and its suburbs. I also check every change of address to Koniz. These names go into a pool that I cross-reference to the alumni registries of the top hundred chemical engineering programs and the index of articles in chemical engineering trade-journals. By keeping track of who you're hiring, and what their specialty is, I can keep an eye on what your upcoming projects are. When I see a load of new hires, I start paying very close attention, and then I branch out.

"Since you and I are in the same business, it wouldn't be extraordinary for me to call up your manufacturing subcontractor and ask them if they'd be interested in bidding on certain large jobs. I set these jobs up such that I can test the availability of each type of apparatus they use: dish detergent, hand-soap, lotion, and so on. Likewise, I can invite your packaging suppliers and teamsters to bid on jobs.

"Once I determine that you are, for example, launching a line of laundry detergent in the next month or so, I am forearmed. I can go to the major retail outlets, offer them my competing laundry detergent below cost, on the condition that they sign a six-month exclusivity deal. A few weeks later, you roll out your new line but none of the retailers can put it on their shelves."

"Ah," the sergeant said. He stared pensively over my shoulder, out the door, where a queue of trustafarians waited in exhausted silence. "Ah," he said again. He turned to his clipboard and I waited while his stylus scritched over its surface for several minutes. "You can take him now. Be gentle to him," he said in French. "Thank you, M'ser Rosen. This has been educational."

Day 2: Bend Over and Say "Aaaah!"

They dumped me in a makeshift barracks, a locked office with four zonked-out trustafarians already sleeping on the industrial gray carpet. I rolled my jacket into a pillow, stuck my shoes underneath it, and eventually slept.

I was wakened by sleepy footfalls in the hallway, punctuated with the thudding steps of power-armor. I was waiting by the door when a frère in power-armor unlocked it and opened it.

He hit the spotlights on his shoulder and flooded the room with harsh light. I forced myself to keep my eyes open, and stood still until my pupils adjusted. My roommates rolled over and groaned.

"Get up," Power-armor said.

"Upyershithole," one of the trustafarians moaned. He pulled his jacket over his head. Power-armor moved to him with mechanical swiftness, grabbed him by one shoulder, and hauled him upright. The trustafarian howled. "Motherfucker! I'll kick your ass! I'll *sue* your ass! Put me down!"

Power-armor dropped him, then surveyed the others. They'd all struggled to their feet. The one with the potty-mouth was rubbing his shoulder and glaring furiously.

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"Vit'march," Power-armor suggested, and followed us out into the corridor.

He wasn't kidding about the "vite" part, either. He moved us a at brisk trot up the stairs, easily pacing us. When I came to Paree, this office-building had been a see-through, completely empty. A few years later, a developer had reclaimed it, renovated it, and gone bankrupt. Now it was finally tenanted. Eventually, we emerged onto a roof easily six stories high, ringed with barbed wire, with a view of one of the cathedral domes and lots of crumbly little row-houses. Other conscriptees were already on the roof, men and women, but I couldn't find Sissy.

Burly frères were in position around the roof, wearing side-arms. Some stood on cherry-pickers raised several meters off the roof, with rifles on tripods. They swept the rooftop, then the street below, then the rooftop again. I wondered how they got the cherry-pickers onto the roof in the first place, then spotted a cluster of power-armored frères, and figured it out. These boys would just each take a corner and *jump*. Beat the hell out of block-and-tackle.

"You will queue up to receive temporary uniforms," one of the power-armors broadcast. I was right at the front of the line. A frère sized me up and pulled the zips open on several duffels, then tossed me a shirt and a pair of pants.

I hurried down the queue to a table laden with heavy, worn combat boots. They stank of their previous owners, and evoked a little shudder from me.

"Jesus-shit, are we supposed to fucking *wear* these?" The voice had a familiar Yankee twang. I didn't need to turn around to see that it was my roommate, Potty-Mouth. He was carrying his uniform under one arm, and holding the other one at his side, painfully.

The smile vanished from the frère's face. He picked up the smelliest, most worn pair, and passed it to him. "Put these on, friend. Now." His voice was low and dangerous, and his accent made the words almost unintelligible.

"I am *not* gonna 'poot zees ahn,' you fucking frog shit. Put 'em on yourself," Potty-Mouth looked to be about twenty, maybe a year older than Sissy, and he had a bull's neck and thick, muscular arms, and gave off a road-rage vibe that I associate with steroidal athletes. He dropped the uniform and picked up one of the boots, and pitched it straight into the frère's face, with a whistling snap that sliced the air.

The frère plucked it from the sky with chemically enhanced reflexes and shot it right back at Potty-Mouth. It nailed him square in the forehead.

Potty's head snapped back hard, and I winced in sympathy as he crumpled to the ground. I stepped away, hoping to melt back into the crowd. The sergeant from the night before blocked my way, along with the frère who'd thrown the boot. "Get him out of the way, M'ser Rosen," the sergeant said.

"We can't move him," I extemporized. "He might have a spinal injury. Please."

The sergeant's smile stayed fixed, but it grew hard, and a little cruel. "M'ser Rosen, you are a new recruit. New recruits don't question orders." The frère who'd thrown the boot cracked his knuckles.

I grabbed Potty-Mouth under his dripping armpits and hauled him over the gravel, trying to support his head and biting back the urge to retch as his sweat poured over my hands. At this rate, I'd be out of steri-wipes in a very short time.

I wiped my hands off on his shirt and crouched next to him. The trustafarians were reluctantly removing their clothes and putting them into rip-

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stop shopping bags with Exxon logos, shivering in the cold. Women frères did the girls—still no sign of Sissy—and men did the boys, all nice and above-board. A frère came over to us, dropped two bags, and said, "Strip." I started to protest, but caught the eye of the sergeant, standing by one of the cherry-pickers.

Resignedly, I stripped off my clothes and bagged them, then bagged my uniform along with them, and sealed it shut.

"This one, too," the frère said, kicking Potty-Mouth in the ribs.

Potty-Mouth jerked and grunted. His jaw lolled open. I began to mechanically strip Potty-Mouth of his stinking neoprene and spandex muscle-wear. I was beyond caring about microbes at this point.

The frère watched me, grinning all the while. I wondered how I ended up babysitting this spoiled roid-head, and stared at my feet.

Four frères in power-armor sailed onto the roof from the road below, carrying an ambulance bus at the corners. They set it down, popped the doors, and a cadre of white-coated medics poured out. The one who impersonally groped my balls for hernias and stuck me with several none-too-sterile needles needed a shower, and his white coat could've used a cleaning, too. When he bent over to check out Potty-Mouth, his pocket bulged open and I saw a collection of miniature bottles of Johnnie Walker Red. He popped me in the shoulder with some kind of mutant staplegun that stung like filth. "What's wrong with this one?" he asked me, speaking for the first time.

"Maybe a concussion, maybe a spinal. I think his shoulder's dislocated."

The medic disappeared into the bus for a moment, then reemerged in a leaded apron, and lugging a bulky apparatus. I realized with a start that it was a portable x-ray, and scrambled to get behind him. "No spinal, no concussion," he pronounced, after a long moment's staring into the apparatus's eyepiece.

"Okay," the medic said to himself, and made a tick on a wireless clipboard.

The medics bugged out the way they'd come in, and the frères withdrew with rapid, military precision, up the cherry-pickers.

I had a pretty good idea of what was coming next, but it still shocked a curse from my lips. The frères in the cherry-pickers all harnessed up giant blowers and turned loose a stinging mist of sinus-burning disinfectant down on us. Trustafarians, male and female, screamed and ran for the barbed wire, then turned and ran back into the center. Above me, I heard the frères laughing. I stood my ground and let myself get soaked once, twice, a third time. I was about to make sure that Potty-Mouth was lying on his side when he groaned again and sat up. "Fuck!" he shouted.

He scrambled groggily to his feet, careered into me, righted himself and wobbled uncertainly as the last of the spray settled over him. The disinfectant evaporated quickly, leaving my skin feeling tight and goose-pimply.

Potty-Mouth swung his head around with saurian sloth. He focused on me and grabbed my shoulder. "The fuck are you doing to me, fag?" His grip tightened, grinding my collarbone.

"Chill out," I said, placatingly. "We're in the same boat. We're drafted."

"Where are my clothes?"

"In that bag. We had to strip while they sprayed us. Look, could you let go of my shoulder?"

He did. "You may be drafted, bro, but not me. I'm leaving." He popped the seal on the bag and struggled into his civvies.

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"Look, there's no percentage in this. Just keep calm, and let this thing sort itself out. You're gonna get yourself killed."

Potty-Mouth ignored me and took off toward the door we'd used to get onto the roof. He kicked it three times before it splintered and gave. I looked up at the frères in the cherry-pickers. They were watching him calmly.

A small, wiry frère was waiting behind the door Potty-Mouth kicked in. He stepped out, grinning. Potty-Mouth threw a punch at the frère's solar plexus. The frère whoofed a little, but didn't lose his grin.

Potty-Mouth grappled with him, lifting the smaller man off his feet. The frère took the beating for what seemed like a long time, merely twisting to avoid the groin and face-shots that Potty-Mouth aimed. The trustafarians on the roof were all silent, watching, shivering.

Finally, the frère had had enough. He broke free of Potty-Mouth's grip on his arms with ease, and as he dropped to the ground, smashed Potty-Mouth in both ears simultaneously. Potty-Mouth reeled, and the little frère aimed a series of hard, wicked-fast blows at his ribs. I heard cracking.

Potty-Mouth started to fall, but the frère caught him, picked him up over his head, then piledrivered him into the gravel. He lay unmoving there, head at an angle that suggested he wouldn't be getting up any time soon.

The frères in the cherry-pickers scrambled down. One of them slung Potty-Mouth over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes and carried him down the stairs. The little frère who'd killed him stepped back into the doorway, pulling the broken door shut behind him.

"Get dressed," broadcast a power-armor.

They herded us back downstairs without a word. The crowd moved with utter docility, and I could see the logic of the proceedings. Terrified, blood-sugar bottomed out, thirsty, we were completely without fight.

On the third floor, the cubicles and desks had all been piled in a corner, making one big space. A few long tables were set up with industrial-size pots of something that steamed and smelled bland and uninspired. My mouth filled with saliva.

"Form an orderly queue," said the sergeant from the night before, who was waiting behind one of the pots with an apron over his uniform, a ladle in his hand.

He looked each trustafarian over carefully as they passed through the line, clutching large bowls that were efficiently filled with limp vegetables, lumpy potatoes, and a brown, greasy gravy. Each of us was issued a stale baguette and a cup of orange drink and sent away.

We seated ourselves on the floor and ate greedily off our laps. Here in the mess, the frères relaxed and allowed the men and women to mingle.

Friends found each other and shared long hugs, then ate in silence. I ate alone, back to a wall, and watched the others.

Once everyone had passed through the line, the sergeant began walking through the clusters, stooping to talk and joke. He touched people's shoulders, handed out cigarettes, and was generally endearing and charming.

He made his way over to me.

"M'ser Rosen."

"Sergeant."

He sat down beside me. "How is the food?"

"Oh, very good," I said, without irony. "Would you like some baguette?"

"No, thank you."

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I tore off a hunk of bread and sopped up some gravy.

"It is a shame about your friend, on the roof."

I grunted. Potty-Mouth had been no friend of mine—and in a situation like this one, I knew, you have to be discriminate in apportioning your loyalty.

"Ah." He stared thoughtfully at the trustafarians. "You understand, though, why it had to be?"

"I suppose."

"Ah?"

"Well, once he was taken care of, the rest saw that there was no point in struggling."

"Yes, I suppose that was part of it. The other part is that there in no place in a war for disobedience."

War. Huh.

The sergeant read my face. "Oh yes, M'ser Rosen. War. We're still fighting street-to-street in the northern suburbs, and some say that the Americans are pushing for a UN 'Peacekeeping' mission. They're calling it Operation Havana. I'm afraid that your government takes a dim view of our nationalizing their stores and offices."

"Not my government, Sergeant. . . ."

"Abalain. François Abalain. I apologize, I had forgotten that you are a Canadian. Where did you say you live?"

"I have a flat on Rue Texas."

"Yes, yes. Far from the fighting. You and the other *étrangers* behave as though our struggle here were nothing but an uninteresting television program. It couldn't last. You had pitched your tents on the side of a smoking volcano, and the lava has reached you."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that our army needs support staff: cooks, mechanics' assistants, supply clerks, janitors, office staff. Every loyal Parisian is already giving everything he can afford to the Cause. It is time that you, who have enjoyed Paris' splendor in comfort and without cost, pay for your stay."

"Sergeant, no offense, but I have rent receipts in my filing cabinet. I pay for groceries. I am paying for my stay."

The sergeant lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. "Some bills can't be settled with money. When you fight for the freedom of the group, the group must pay for it."

"Freedom?"

"Ah." He looked out at the trustafarians, who were leaning against each other, eyes downcast, utterly dejected. "In the cause of freedom, it may be necessary to abridge the personal liberties of a few individuals. But this isn't slave labor: each of you will be paid in good Communard Francs, at the going rate. It won't hurt these spoiled children to do some honest work."

I decided that if the chance ever came, I'd kill Sergeant François Abalain.

I swallowed my anger. "My cousin, a young girl named Sissy, she was taken last night. She was just passing through, and asked me to take her out to the club. My aunt must be crazy with worry."

The sergeant pulled his clipboard out of his coat pocket and snapped it open. He scritched on it. "What is her last name?"

"Black. S-I-S-S-Y B-L-A-C-K."

He scritched more and scowled at the display. He scritched again. "M'ser Rosen, I'm very sorry, but there is no record of any Sissy Black here. Could she have given us a false name?"

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I thought about it. I hadn't seen Sissy for ten years before she emailed me that she was coming to Paree. She'd always struck me as a very straight, sheltered kid, though I'd been forced to revise my opinion of her upward after she gutted out that long bus-ride. Still, I couldn't imagine her having the cunning to make up a name on the spot. "I don't think so. What does that mean?"

"Probably a clerical error. You see, we're all so overworked; that is why you are here, really. I'll speak with Sergeant Dumont. She handled women's intake. I'm sure everything is fine."

Our "training" began the next morning. Like high-school gym class with heavily armed teachers—running, squats, jumping jacks. Even a rope climb. Getting us in shape was the furthest thing from their minds—this was all about dulling what little sense of initiative we might have left. I tried to stay focused on Sissy, on where she might have gone or what might have happened to her. For a few days my speculations got darker and darker until in my mind's eye I saw her being used as some sort of sex-toy by the senior members of the Commune. I had no reason to believe this; the Communards were like the Victorians or the Maoists in their determination not to let sex get in the way of politics. But I was running out of even remotely acceptable possibilities. And then one afternoon I realized I hadn't thought about her at all since waking. The fatigue had fried my brain and all I could think about was my next rest-break.

Once we'd been thoroughly pacified, they started taking us out on workgangs of ten or fifteen, clearing rubble and repainting storefronts. On a particularly lucky day, I got to spend ten hours deep in rebuilt Communard Territory, laying down epoxy cobblestones.

We worked in a remote cul-de-sac, a power-armored frère blocking the only exit route, so motionless that I wondered if he was asleep. I worked alone, as was my habit—I had no urge to become war buddies with any of the precious tots I'd been conscripted with.

I'd never been this deep into the rebuilt zone before. It was horrible, a mixture of Nouveau and Deco perpetrated by someone who'd no understanding of either. The Communards had turned the narrow storefronts into 1930s movie sets, painted over their laserprinted signage in fanciful, curlicued Toulouse Lautrec script. Cleverly concealed speakers piped out distant hot jazz with convincing Victrola hiss, clinking stemware, and Gallic laughter.

We arrived just after dawn, and within a very short time, my knees were killing me. A few Parisians had trickled down the block: a baker who cranked out his awning and set baskets of baguettes in the window; a few femmes des menages with sexy skirts, elaborate up-dos, and catseye glasses clacked down the street; a gang of insouciant lads flicked their cigarette ends at us poor groveling conscriptees and swaggered on.

I managed to keep it together until the organ-grinder arrived. It was the monkey that did it. Or maybe it was the Edith Piaf cylinder he had in his hurdy-gurdy. On balance, it was the way the monkey danced to Piaf—I started chuckling, then laughing, then roaring, so hysterical that I actually flopped over on my back and writhed on the cobblestones I'd laid down.

The Parisians tried to ignore me, but I was making quite a spectacle of myself. Eventually, they all slunk away, looking embarrassed and resentful. I stared at the gray sky and held my belly and snorted as they departed, and

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then a patch of cobblestones beside me exploded, showering me with resinous shrapnel, bruising my ribs and my arm. The power-armor at the street's entrance lowered his PowerFist pistol and broadcast a simple order: "Work."

It seemed less funny after that. Edith may have regretted nothing, but I started setting new records for self-pity.

I'm pretty sure I lost track of the time while we were trapped in that old office block. Maybe I was concussed—the frères weren't shy about slapping us around. I doubt it, though. More likely I just stopped thinking as a way to get through the days.

Until the evening they started dividing us into groups.

The frères said nothing as they culled people from the bloc in the mess-hall. The smaller trustafarians had been clustered into two groups; no heavy labor for them, was my guess.

Unlike the scene when we were brought in, there was almost no noise. There was no sign of Sissy, but with our heads shaved I'm not sure I'd have recognized her.

I had just identified one group as being visually different when a pointing finger directed me into it, giving me opportunity to study its members close-up.

We were a sullen-faced bunch, and I had this sudden, chilling feeling that wasn't helped in the slightest by the frère who grinned at us as he nudged us out the door of the mess-hall. He's like a herdsman, I thought, and looking again at the faces of the trustafarians around me, I guessed that we were the group of troublemakers. We were being culled.

Day 9: Full Metal Baguette

The next morning I began to serve the Paris Commune in earnest. Our group had been taken out of the barracks and driven in the back of an old panel van to one of the outer arrondissements. The gunfire sounded a lot louder in the street than I was used to, though, and I felt a caffeine-jag of fear when we were led into a dark, abandoned shop and taken to a bivouac in the cellar. We were given new clothes: Bangladeshi belts, the webbing of a weird fiber-plastic combo; and new T-shirts, the cotton still strangely stiff, to wear under our good Communard uniform blouses.

In the anemic sunshine of an April morning they took us outside to put us to death.

Oh, that's not what they told us. "You are runners," a frère said as we stood in the street. He wore the badges of a lieutenant—though he bore just a single earring—and was using a loud-hailer to be heard above the gunfire that snapped like angry dogs at the buildings nearby. "We are still in the process of clearing the Blancs from this arrondissement," he continued. "It is a building-by-building job, and our ammunition consumption is high. We can't spare fighters to carry rounds to our positions, so that's what you will do. Follow me, m'sers."

He took a step toward the corner. I started moving after him. I couldn't see any point in sticking around to be shot by one of the sour-faced guards.

At the end of the next block, a group of frères crouched behind a wrecked Citroën. Gunfire echoed from somewhere behind the building across the street from them. Our lieutenant reached the group behind the wreckage, and exchanged words.

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"Here," the corporal said, throwing a hemp bag at me. I caught it, and had to stifle some very military language—the thing weighed a ton. It clattered like cheap toys, which made sense when I looked inside and saw that the bag was filled with plastic magazines.

"Not him," our lieutenant said. He pointed to the last of the stragglers approaching the Citroën. "My friend, it's time to do your part." He gestured at me; I shrugged and tossed the bag to the laggard, a scrawny trustafarian whose cheeks still bore the remnants of semipermanent tattoos. He dropped the bag, and didn't bother to restrain his opinion of its weight. "Pick it up," our lieutenant said. "Your life may depend on how well you carry that.

"We have a fire-team in that building across the street. You will take this bag to them, and ask them if they've heard anything from the teams further up the block. The damned Blancs are jamming our communications again." I looked along the line our lieutenant's finger had traced. It didn't seem that far to me. A couple of weeks ago, I wouldn't have thought twice about strolling across the street, even in the face of Parisian traffic.

The kid picked his way through the rubble to the edge of the furthest building on our side of the street. He peered across, reminding me of an old man I used to see on the Rue Texas from time to time, who took forever to work up the courage to brave the traffic on my narrow street. Dust had made the kid's face the same gray as the old man's. I guess I should have felt sick myself, but I don't remember feeling anything.

I saw movement across and up the street—that would be the fireteam, calling its runner forward. The kid looked back at us, and I was impressed at how widely his eyes were open, and how white they looked. Our lieutenant casually waved the kid forward—though the gun in the lieutenant's hand lent a lot of weight to the gesture. The kid began to run.

Then he wasn't running anymore, and a dark red pool was spreading over the pavé from under his crumpled body. I hadn't heard a shot, and the kid hadn't made a sound, other than the dusty scuffling sound his body'd made when it hit the stones. Our lieutenant didn't seem that surprised, though. "Did you get it?" he asked the corporal. "Quickly!" The corporal nodded, simultaneously waving forward one of his companions, who gave him something too small for me to see, and which the corporal plugged into a slot in a hardcover notebook. The new frère gave a thumbs-up, and picked up a wicked-looking, bloated rifle. Then he stepped out into the street, raised the gun, fired, and stepped back into the shelter offered by the pockmarked wall. Somewhere out of my line of vision, a building exploded.

It sounded like he'd blown up half the city. It was like being inside a thunderstorm, and I instinctively put my hands over my ears in a too-late attempt to protect them. The incredible noise was still rumbling when our lieutenant picked up another crudely woven bag, handed it to me and said, "Go."

I'd been numb up to that point, just watching what was happening without really seeing it. When my hand closed on the bag's handle and I felt the hemp fibers scratching my palm, it was as if I'd suddenly come to the surface of a warm lake and broken into clear, freezing air. That was the moment I realized that Sissy was dead. That we were all dead. No point in kidding myself; they'd probably killed her within a day of raiding the Dialtone. There were all sorts of ways it could have happened. None of them mattered to me. "Fuck the lot of you," I said quietly, and walked into the street.

I didn't run. What was the point? I walked as though I were just on my way to the corner to buy lunch. If I could have, I'd have whistled a jaunty

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tune, something from Maurice Chevalier or Boy George. My mouth was too dry to make a properly jaunty sound.

I passed the trustafarian, lying dusty and broken on the cobbles. I made a point of looking at the spot from which the killing shot must have come, and was surprised to see that the building at the end of the block was mostly still there. That huge explosion, whose final basso still echoed, had come from the destruction of just one room. The chamber and its window—and, presumably, the Blanc sniper hiding there—had been plucked from the building's structure like a bad tooth. And now I was taking my little walk so that our lieutenant could see whether any more snipers waited. Now I realize that this is what it means to fight building to building, room to room. At the time, I thought nothing. Felt nothing. Just walked.

No shot came. No expanding round ripped open my back and spread my lungs out like wings behind me.

I reached the building that was my goal, and discovered that the fire team was already moving through it, into its courtyard and beyond to the next block. A solitary, grimy frère waited for me. Grabbing the bag, he spat at my feet and hustled to join his comrades. I guess he didn't appreciate my sangfroid.

By the time our lieutenant and the others had caught up to me, I'd had a chance to do some thinking. I stripped off the stiff, new T-shirt and web belt and buried them in some rubble. I didn't know what they represented, but I was pretty damned sure they had something to do with the way our lieutenant had been able to pinpoint the location of the sniper who'd killed Scrawny. The frères might kill me, but I was going to see that they didn't benefit in any way from it.

We were hustled through the ruined building in the wake of the fire team. Another body lying in the next street gave mute evidence to the existence of another Blanc sniper somewhere. Our lieutenant pointed to the ammo bag beside the body—which I now saw was that of the grimy frère I'd forced to play catch-up—and said to me, "No sense in letting that go to waste. Pick it up as you go."

I smiled broadly. "Glad to," I said. "You might as well keep your computer locked up, though." I spread my hands and shrugged. "No belt. No T-shirt. No service." I'm pretty sure I giggled; the whole scene had the surreality of a night in a trustafarian club.

Before our lieutenant could say or do anything, though, a frère wearing a headset stepped between us. "Lieutenant," he said, "M'ser le sergeant Abalain wants to speak to you."

Just like that, our lieutenant's face had the same pallor as the dead trustafarian's. I was impressed; I hadn't thought an officer could be that scared of a noncom, even one as reptilian as Abalain. Our lieutenant took the headset and put it on. He closed his eyes as he listened.

"It was the shirt," Abalain said. We were sitting in his office, in a rebuilt nineteenth-century apartment building. Through the window I could see the office block that had been my barracks through the first few weeks of my nightmare. "They're made of a special cloth threaded with sensors. Developed to treat battlefield casualties; the sensors record the direction and velocity of anything that hits the cloth. We adapted it by stitching a small transmitter into the collar band. It's a very handy way of fixing a location on snipers, the more so since the Blancs and Penistes don't know that we

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can do this." He spread his hands and smiled. "Of course, it was a mistake that you were assigned to this duty."

I sipped from the Tigger glass Abalain had given to me. The wine was a good one—rich and full, tannins almost gone but still tasting a bit of blackberry. I guessed it had been in someone's cellar for a good few years before being called on to do its bit for the cause. Forcing myself to think about the wine was a deliberate attempt to keep my emotions in check. It had been nearly twenty-four hours since I'd been pulled from death-duty, and I think I'd only stopped shaking just before being brought to Abalain's office. I have a vague memory of my fear and rage bursting from me as I was being led away from the carnage, of kicking the death-duty lieutenant in the balls. Of course, that could just be wishful thinking.

For some reason, it occurred to me as I sipped that it had been weeks since I'd had a cigarette. Not only did the wine taste better, I seemed to have been too busy or too frightened to go through withdrawal. "Does this mean that I'm free to go?"

Abalain laughed, the sound of a padlock rattling against a graveyard gate. "I admire your sense of humor, M'ser," he said. "Know that if I could, I'd send you back to your place in the rue Texas. My report on our little chat about your work has been read with interest by important people. Accordingly, I've been ordered to give you a new opportunity to serve the cause."

The following day I reported to the office next-door to Abalain's. It wasn't furnished nearly as nicely, but it wasn't a cellar and there was nobody shooting at me, so I decided I was better off. I never saw either the lieutenant or any of my fellow-targets again. I confess I didn't really worry about them, either.

Abalain had told me to meet him in order to learn about my new assignment. I was pretty sure I already knew what it was, and while waiting for him to show I decided to investigate. I couldn't help myself; when presented with a mass of data I have to know what it is, and the battered metal desk that dominated the room was a pictorial definition of "mass of data." There were three distinct piles on top of the desk; the talus slopes of their near-collapse pretty much covered the entire surface. Two of the piles were paper, the third was of various storage media: magneto-optical disks, a couple of ancient Zips and even a holocube or two.

The paper pile nearest to me consisted of various official garbage: press releases, wire story print-outs. The ones I looked at were all from either the UN or one of the three main Blanc organizations. The other pile was a series of virtually indecipherable French-language documents that I was eventually able to identify as field reports from libertine officers and operatives.

"You can make some sense of that, yes?" Abalain stood in the doorway.

I looked him in the eye for a second, then returned to the reports. "What kind of sense do you want me to make?"

"You will do what you described to me when you were first—ah—recruited. I have need of information that I suspect is buried within these reports and press releases. You will use your skills to draw that information forth." He smiled at me with what he no doubt thought was encouragement. Maybe he'd been a management consultant before deciding that the revolution offered better opportunities to fuck with people. "You will work here, and send the information to me as you assemble it. You will use the clipboard and wearable that are in the upper right-hand drawer; they connect to a fiberoptic pipe linked directly to a secure folder on my desktop. You will,

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regrettably, have no outside access. But don't worry about that; I'll see that you get all of the information you need to do your work."

More than enough information, I told myself.

Day 30: The Revolution Will Not Be Franchised

"I gotta admit, I just don't understand this revolution."

"What's not to understand?" Abalain offered me a Marlie; I was somewhat surprised at the gesture, and even more surprised to find myself shaking my head. "We're not really revolutionaries, you know. We're trying to restore the glories of French civilization; in a way, that makes us conservatives."

I believe the accepted term is "reactionaries," I thought. "Which no doubt explains why so many of your slogans seem to have been drawn from fast-food advertising," I said, waving a flimsy at him. "'La France: Have It Your Way'?"

"The fast-food philosophy is inherently French," Abalain said. "It's a peasant philosophy, not some tarted-up bourgeois haute-cuisine thing. It's like the epoxy cobbles you and your 'Old Paree Hands' are so dismissive about. They're perfectly in keeping with the scientific rationalism of the original revolution." He spoke in crisp, rapid French. He'd caught me listening too intently to one of his phone conversations the week before and confronted me with a barrage of French. When my facial expression made it clear that I understood every word, he'd nodded smartly and gone back to his conversation, as though he'd suspected it all along.

"Unless they're laid down by Disney," I said.

"Then it's cultural imperialism," Abalain said. I'd have liked him just a little if he'd smiled, or showed any sign of having a sense of humor. But he was deadly serious, and I hated him even more for it.

"So what's your part in all this?" I asked. "You a spook?"

"I'm nothing of the sort, M'ser Rosen. And if I was, I certainly wouldn't tell you." He blew a jet of smoke past my left ear; I smelled burning garbage. "I'm just a servant of the Commune," he said. "I do what I can to bring France back into the sunlight of scientific rationalism. Please know that we are all grateful for the assistance you have been providing."

And that you've been taking credit for, I thought. "I could do more," I said, "if I had access to more information." What I'd been given so far wouldn't have been enough to help a fundamentalist preacher track down sin. I had to be able to make a big score in order for my plan to work.

"I've been impressed with what you've given me to date," Abalain said. *Jesus,* I thought. *If they're impressed by that merde, this will be easier than I thought.* "Granted it hasn't had much direct tactical value. But already we've been able to wrong-foot the Penistes at least twice in the media. We've taken the lead in the propaganda campaign; in the long run that may be as important as anything our fighters do."

"At least let me see the uncensored field reports." I pulled a handful of crumpled flimsies from a pants pocket. Two-thirds of the text had been blacked or blanked. "I should be the judge of whether or not information is usable."

"I'll see what I can do," he said.

The next morning an unhappy-looking frère kicked a plastic box into my office. The papers, flimsies, and chips were chaos illustrated; but I didn't

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care. I always get a rush from a fresh source of data, and the rush was greater this time because the stakes were so much higher.

One of the first things I learned when I finally got down to analysis was that my old ami Commandant Ledoit was dead. The first reference was in a press release from a couple of weeks ago; he'd been killed, it was claimed, by the Blancs. But it didn't take much sleuthing to suss out that he had in fact been dusted by the Commune. I found a reference to a series of denunciations by Abalain's juniors, and while the accusations weren't detailed the result was still clear enough. If I hadn't already had my suspicions raised, that would have set my spideysense tingling.

As it was, I was more grimly satisfied than surprised. Every revolution eventually eats its young, someone once said. For the Paris Commune, the buffet had apparently begun. That was fine for me; in fact, my plan depended on it.

I worked hard over the next week. After what I'd been through, there was a deep, almost rich pleasure in being able to throw myself into investigation. Little by little I spun my web—making sure that I also took the time to generate some truly killer conclusions about what the Blancs and Penistes were up to. It was actually pretty easy. Compared with most corporations, governments are as complex as nap-time at a daycare. And neither the Blancs nor the Penistes—nor the Commune, come to that—was even a government by any normal conception of that word. So it was only a few days after I started when Abalain brought me a bottle of really good Remy by way of congratulating me on my utter fabness. I'm more of a bourbon than a cognac type, but I accepted the bottle anyway. It was the least Abalain could do for me; I intended to make sure of that.

After he gave me the bottle, I didn't see the sergeant for two weeks. I took advantage of the break to wander around the building, and eventually even the neighborhood. It hadn't taken long for word to get out that Abalain had himself a pet spook, and nobody really paid any attention to the grubby guy in the soiled white suit. That dusted whatever doubts I may have had about Abalain's juice within the Commune; the man wore his sergeant's stripes like sheep's clothing.

Discovering the truth about Sissy's fate did not create my resolve to kill Abalain; it only deepened it. I'd hardly spared her a thought since the fresh lieutenant used me for a decoy, but in one raft of papers, I turned up an encoded list of inductees from the Dialtone. It was nicely divided by sex and nationality, though the names themselves were encrypted. Only one female Canadian appeared on the list. I realized then that it had been weeks since I'd thought of Sissy, and I felt myself poised atop a wall of anguish so high that I couldn't bear to look down. Instead, I went back to work, and turned up an encrypted list of bunk assignments—it was nearly identical to the list of inductees, but a number of the female names were missing, including the lone Canadian one.

Putting two and two together is what I do. I couldn't stop myself, then. Sissy and any number of young, carefree trustafarians had been conscripted for a very different kind of service to the Commune—the kind of service that required a boudoir rather than a bunk.

Up until then, I'd been trying to formulate a plan that would put paid to Abalain while I walked away scot-free. When I saw the second list, I felt a return of the unreal, uncaring fatalism I'd felt when I walked out into the street lugging the bag of ammunition. Abalain would die, and I would die, too.

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The freedom to move around that Abalain's patronage afforded also gave me all the opportunity I needed to type in some new reports from a variety of unsecured terminals and wireless keypads, using the IDs I'd picked up from the uncensored reports Abalain had given me. There was nothing flamboyant or, God forbid, clumsy about these reports. I even managed to duplicate the horrible grammar some of the frère field agents had used. And most of the information I put into them could easily be verified, since it was just cribbed from other sources or from my own validated speculation on what the other side was doing. That's how you do it, you see: you put in so much truth that the few bits of fabulation go more or less unnoticed.

More or less, that is, until somebody decides that all those trees must mean something and makes a point of looking at the forest. I was pretty sure that, like all revolutions, this one had its share of tree-counters.

I have to admit, though, that I was pretty nervous by the end of the second week. You like to think that you know your job, that the outcome of something you start is predictable within the limits of your experience. But every job carries with it the fear of complete catastrophe, and if this job went down in flames.... It didn't bear thinking of.

So I was more than a little shocked when Abalain burst into my office late one afternoon, looking as though he'd just learned that capitalism really was the most effective economic philosophy.

"We have to go, you and I," Abalain said.

"Go where?" I asked. I hadn't expected to see him again; had, in fact, expected to read his obituary in the next batch of Commune press releases.

"I'll explain later. But take your notepad with you." He cut the pad free from its lock and cable, and handed it to me. "We're going to need this to get through the lines."

"Through the lines?"

"Don't be dense, and just do as I say." Abalain seemed to be reverting to the bourgeois martinet I'd always suspected him of being. "I have some things to do. Meet me in the lobby in five minutes. Be there, Rosen, or I'll have you shot."

Normalment, I'm not so slow on the uptake. I guess that I'd been so sure I'd taken care of Abalain that I'd been blinded to what was really happening: the bastard had found out that he was going to be denounced, and had decided to take his leave of his frères before they removed his head from his shoulders, or however it was that they dispatched those who no longer fit with the Commune's vision of the past-into-future.

I was only thrown off my game for a moment, though. My business forces you to think on your feet, and I was on mine in a second. I slipped into Abalain's office, and started filling my pockets with whatever was lying about. I made sure that I grabbed his wearable; the computer was locked, of course, but I was rapidly formulating a plan for dealing with that.

My suit may have looked a little bit rumpled when I got to the lobby, but the frères were a pretty sartorially challenged bunch at the best of times, so I wasn't surprised that nobody noticed my bulging pockets.

"What's happened?" I asked Abalain as soon as we were outside and walking on the poly-resin cobbles. He'd headed us north, presumably toward the toney arrondissements of the north-east where the Blancs still held sway.

"A friend let slip that I was going to be denounced before the Central Committee," he said. "There's no justification for such a thing, of course."

"Of course," I said.

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"But a man in a position such as mine inevitably seems to inspire jealousy, and justified or not I'm pretty sure things wouldn't go well for me if I let myself be called. So with regret I have to end my service to the revolution and the Commune. It's their misfortune."

"And me?" I stuffed my hands in my pockets in case Abalain got too curious about their shape.

"But I thought you were eager to return to your home." Abalain made a sympathetic little moue with his mouth, and it was all I could do to keep from kicking him in the balls. "You, m'ser Rosen, are my ticket through the lines, of course."

"Of course."

As usual, Abalain was ahead of the curve on the whole denunciation thing. His casual wave was enough to get us through the various checkpoints and posts we encountered as we walked through the Communard zone; nobody'd been told yet that he was now an enemy of the revolution. I began to regret not spreading my disinformation a little more widely.

"Do you want to tell me how you plan to do this?" I asked him as we walked away from yet another group of fawning, too-serious-for-words frères. "I feel like someone being told to invest without seeing the prospectus."

"Capitalist humor. How droll," he said. "It's quite simple, really. We're headed toward a checkpoint in a comparatively stable part of the front. I'll talk us through our—the Commune's—lines. We're doing some field intelligence work, you and I. Once we're through our lines, we duck out of sight, approach the Blanc lines from a different angle, and then you provide me with my entrée to the Blanc sector. Simple, no?"

"And how do I play my part in this clever plan?"

"Patience, my old. Patience. I'll explain when you need to know, and not before." I shrugged. It wasn't a question of whether Abalain intended to dust me, but when and how. I felt the weight of his wearable around my waist and hoped he'd at least wait until we reached the Blanc lines so that I could surprise him before he surprised me.

The checkpoint showed all the signs of a front that hadn't changed in weeks, possibly months. The smart-wire had accumulated a patina of grime and pigeon-shit you just didn't see in the more active parts of the city. Dogs danced around the feet of the listlessly patrolling frères; there was no power armor in sight. Someone had liberated a video lottery terminal from somewhere and set it up in the observation post Abalain dragged me into; the VLT's reader slot was stuffed with an override card that made play free but also eliminated any payout, and as Abalain drawled his lies to the lieutenant I joined a group of bored frères watching the symbols flash in pointless sequence across the terminal's screen. You'd never know, looking at the crap that had accreted around this corner, that there were parts of Paree where bits were being blown off bodies and buildings as the world's most pointless renovation project continued on its nasty way.

"We go now," Abalain said from behind me. "Do you think that you can tear yourself away from this excitement?" I bit back my reply, and turned to follow. He hadn't even waited for me, and I had to jog for a moment to catch up with him. We ducked into a building, descended to the basement and spent a freaky few seconds in a dark, humid tunnel that brought back nightmares of my brief sojourn as a hot-wired guinea pig, before emerging into the wreckage of an old Metro station. In the distance, I thought I saw a flash of light—reflection from a sniper's scope?

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I stopped, imagining the weight of the sniper's gaze on my chest, just below my sternum, and had a sudden vision of Sissy standing just as I was now. Who knew how many trustafarians had been sacrificed to flushing out the Blancs, and then had their bunks reassigned. I felt a strange mixture of sorrow and relief—it had been quick then, for her; not the drawn-out nightmare of serial rape that had been slithering through my subconscious.

Abalain showed no hesitation; I'll give him that much. He grabbed my arm and pulled me out into the street. This close to freedom I found myself a lot less cold-blooded about being shot than I had been a couple of weeks before. Then we were safely across the road, and inside an abandoned block of flats sheltered from both Communard and Blanc eyes. We were able to traverse a couple of hundred meters of picturesque ruins without being exposed to any more than electronic surveillance. I figured we'd be nearly on top of a Blanc outpost before the frères finally copped to what Abalain was doing.

"So what are you going to do once you're out of Tomorrowland and back in the real world?" I asked him when he stopped us in what seemed to have once been a pretty nice courtyard. "How does a scientific revolutionary make his way in a bourgeois schematic?"

"I'll pretend that was a serious question and not just another pathetic attempt at snideness," he said. "Never try to out-sneer the French, m'ser. We're the masters." *You be expansive, you little shit,* I thought. *Expand away; it'll be more fun to watch you collapse.* "The fact is, M'ser Rosen, I'm an extremely adaptable man. I won't have any trouble fitting into my new life. I'll probably have to move from Paris, and that will be a shame. But even if Bucharest or Buenos Aires isn't the City of Light, I can be comfortable."

He produced a small pistol and pointed it at me. "After all, competitive intelligence work can be done anywhere."

If he was expecting me to look shocked, I disappointed him. I hope I did, anyway. Frankly, I'd expected something a bit more clever. I was grateful, though, that an identity switch was the best he could come up with. After looking at me expectantly for a moment, he scowled and waved the pistol. "Let's go, Sergeant Abalain," he said.

The Blancs had seen us, of course, and a well-armed reception party was waiting when we emerged from the ruins and into the street across which their checkpoint sat. Abalain pushed me forward, then raised his hands above his head. A Blanc in stained coveralls gestured for me to do the same.

"I hope you guys can help me," Abalain said when we reached the Blancs. His English was almost completely unaccented, and I gave him points for that. A resourceful fellow, our sergeant. "I've been a prisoner of those bastards for months," he continued. "This is one of them. His name's Abalain. He's my gift to you if you'll call my embassy and get me out of here."

That set everyone to babbling. I smiled. "Thanks," I said to Abalain. "I always wanted to be famous." He didn't break character, not that I'd expected him to.

An officer showed up. His uniform was tailored, clean and crisply pressed. He wore aviator sunglasses and carried a swagger-stick. *No wonder you guys can't retake the city,* I thought. "So this is the infamous Sergeant Abalain," he said to me.

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"'Fraid not," I told him. "But that is." I nodded at Abalain.

His face spasmed in pretty convincing outrage. "He lies!" he shouted. "He kidnapped me and killed my friends! You can't let him get away with this!"

"Oh, come on," I said. I turned to the officer. "Isn't there anyone here who's seen a picture of Abalain?" I already knew the answer to that—like many of his erstwhile companions, Abalain had been pretty thorough about avoiding cameras—but I was playing a rôle now myself.

The officer smiled, obviously pleased with himself. "Perhaps the thing to do is to try the both of you. You can't both be Abalain, but on the chance that one of you is. . . ."

It was time. I unbuttoned my jacket. "We can settle this easily," I said, and unbuckled Abalain's wearable. Abalain's jaw dropped along with his new persona. I paused, savoring the moment. This was no substitute for Sissy, or even for the weeks he'd ripped from my life. But it was all I was likely to get, so I wanted it to last.

I showed the wearable to the officer. "Retinal lock," I said.

"If you want to see your cousin again, m'ser, stop now."

That pissed me off. "You pathetic son of a bitch," I said. I pulled the flimsies—the list of inductees and the bunk assignments—from my pocket. I held them up in his face. "Where's the Canadian female, François? Look," I stabbed the flimsy as though it were Abalain's heart. "She was inducted—now look here," I rattled the bunk assignments. "No bunk—what happened to her, M'ser le sergeant? Sent to Montmarte? *Target practice?*" A note of hysteria crept into my voice. I swallowed, balled up the flimsies and tossed them against his chest.

"No," he said. "It wasn't like that—"

I didn't let him finish. Smacking the wearable up against my face, I thumbed the power switch. The computer farted its displeasure. "How sad," I said. "Sergeant Abalain's computer doesn't like the look in my eye." I turned it toward Abalain, who backed away. "Gentlemen?" I said to the Blancs. Two of them grabbed Abalain by the shoulders. He tried to twist his head away, but the wearable was more flexible than his neck was. A second later, the computer chirped and lit up all Christmas.

I dropped the wearable to the ground and emptied my pockets onto it. "You should be able to have some fun with all of this," I said. Abalain babbled something I didn't hear. The officer slapped him in the face—whether in response or just on general principle, I didn't care. Then they were all hitting him.

I used the last of my steri-wipes to get his blood off my hands.

Day 63: It'll All End In Tears

"France thanks you for the service you have rendered her, monsieur." I figured the Blanc general was speaking more for the benefit of the news weasels on the other side of the mirrorwall than he was for me, but I nodded my head with what I hoped looked like sagacity. "Bringing the beast Abalain to justice will show the world the true face that lies behind the mask of the Commune de Paris."

I tried to be blasé about it. But looking at this guy, I couldn't help but wonder about the arithmetic of Paree: how in the world did you add up the folks on my street, the ones I played baseball with, and the ones who sold

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me bread and sausage and wine—and end up with assholes like Abalain or this prat? What variable in the goddamn equation made people stop thinking and let their emotions do all the heavy lifting?

I'd hoped to feel cleansed at having done for Abalain, but I didn't.

"Good for you," I said, getting to my feet. "I'd love to stay and watch, but I have to go home now. I'm going to take a forty-eight hour shower, and then I'm going to sleep for a week."

"I believe the people from your embassy want to talk to you, monsieur Rosen," the general said warily.

"Have them call my service," I said. That's me: Mister How to Make Friends and Influence People.

"The photographers say they're not finished yet."

That's just great, I thought. Is there anybody in this city who isn't working an angle?

Sissy hadn't been working anything except maybe her hormones. I'd been able to store her carefully in the back of my mind while working up my escape plan. But she was clamoring to get out of my head now. Being away from the Commune didn't make me any more free than if I'd still been Abalain's pet ferret: I still had to face up to the fact that she was gone. How was I going to explain this to my aunt?

The door behind me slammed open.

"Lee!"

I turned around so fast I fell over. That's my story, anyway, and I'm sticking to it. Then she was down on the carpet with me and hugging me and crying and I guess I got kind of sloppy too. But I swear the first words out of my mouth were: "Where the fuck have you been?"

She slapped me, lightly. "I worried about you too."

"Jesus," I said, sitting up. "I was convinced you were—" I couldn't say it, not now. It seemed it could still happen; I might be imagining this. "What happened to you? How did you get away?"

"It was Eddie," she said.

"Not true, Lee." Eddie flowed into the room, graceful in spite of his bulk. "She's the one who did it. I just got her back across the lines."

"Will you two stop negotiating credits and just tell me what happened?"

"When they separated us when the bus stopped I was so scared," Sissy said. "Everyone was scared. But then I thought about what you'd said. You said not to worry. And you always looked after me, Lee." She smiled, and even though her eyes looked dead with fatigue I still felt better for seeing that. "I figured you knew what you were talking about. So I didn't worry. Instead, I tried to guess what you'd do, and I decided that you'd watch and wait for a chance to do something."

I looked at Sissy more closely. It wasn't just fatigue I was seeing in her eyes. There was something else, something sort of calm and understanding. This wasn't the girl I'd lost back at the Dialtone. Of course, being kidnapped can do that to a person.

"So I'm watching what happens, and what happens is that everybody's so scared that they all just stand there gibbering and crying all over one another," she said. "They must have been doing that all along, but I never noticed it. Until I sat back and made myself look. We were all just crying like babies. And the guards must have noticed too, because when I looked I saw that they weren't really paying any attention to us. They were all watching the guys being rounded up." We were the ones making the fuss, I remem-

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bered. Some of us, anyway. Some of us were still trying to think of a way of finessing ourselves out of that jam.

"So it was really pretty simple." Sissy smiled artlessly, and for a moment she was my kid cousin again. "I just kind of shuffled my feet and moved back without trying to move too much. And when I was at the back of the crowd I just sort of slipped out of it. It was dark and nobody noticed me. But you know, I don't think they were all that smart, Lee. We just let ourselves think they were 'cause we were all so scared. As soon as I started trying to think like you do, it was easy to get away." She hugged me fiercely. "I saw you trying to distract their attention from me, Lee." Now she was crying again. "What you did for me—I couldn't have done that for you." She dug her face into my shoulder and sobbed, and I felt like the stupidest idiot outside of a corporate boardroom. I had out-clevered myself into eight weeks or more of slavery, and she was smart enough to just walk away—and she was giving me the credit?

"And that's when Eddie saved me."

"I followed the bus," Eddie said with a shrug. "Probably not the smartest thing in the world, but hey. I should have seen it coming, and I didn't. I felt responsible, you know?" I knew. "Soon as I saw you all being off-loaded and sorted I figured I was screwed, and I was making my way back to the lines when I come across Sissy here. And damned if she didn't want to take me back and try to spring you. Took me ten minutes to persuade her we'd only get ourselves killed."

"You can always trust Fat Eddie," I said. "He knows three ways around every angle there is. Listening to him definitely saved your life." I decided then that I was never going to tell Sissy the full story of my service to the Commune. Even if it seemed that the Sissy who was smiling at me now wasn't the same kid who'd wanted to see the sights back in the great Before.

"She could have gone home, you know," Fat Eddie said. "Her mom sure as hell wanted her to. Instead, we've spent the last eight weeks nagging the shit out of anybody who'd listen, trying to find you. And now we have."

"And now I want a shower," I said. "I want some clean clothes."

"I want to go back to the Dialtone and finish my drink," Sissy said.

I stared at her. "You're joking, right?"

"Oh, you can shower and change first, if you want." She stood up, then grabbed my hands and pulled me to my feet. "Come on, Lee. It's a glorious time to be in Paree."

Paree—where snipers lurked in the high windows and unwashed thugs stared blindly at castrated video lottery terminals. Paree, where, on the pavé before a rusting Citroën, I had decided to die. The fatal anguish surged through me—

—and *out*. I was a dead man, dead many times over in the past eight weeks, and yet, miraculously, *alive*. Alive, in Gay Paree, where famèd Dialtone yet stood, where the bartender would mix me a Manhattan and my cousin Sissy would dance while I watched approvingly from a side table, chewing on my work-problems and swapping ironic glances with Fat Eddie.

I extended an arm and Sissy took it at the elbow. Fat Eddie shouldered us a path through the crowd, over the epoxy cobblestones, and down the boulevard toward the Dialtone. ○

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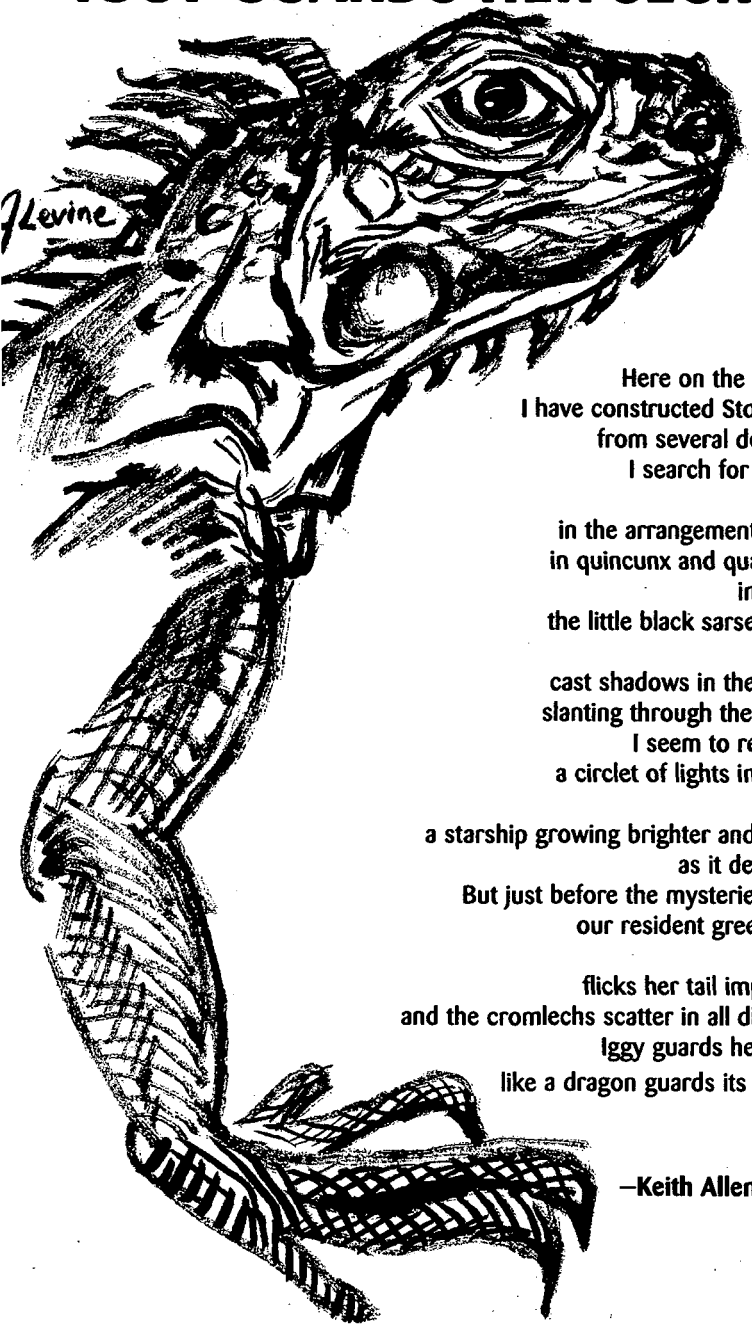
IGGY GUARDS HER SECRETS



Here on the table top
I have constructed Stonehenge
from several dominoes.
I search for meaning

in the arrangement of dots,
in quincunx and quadrangle,
in the way
the little black sarsen stones

cast shadows in the sunlight
slanting through the window.
I seem to remember
a circlet of lights in the sky,

a starship growing brighter and brighter
as it descended.
But just before the mysteries unfold,
our resident green iguana

flicks her tail imperiously
and the cromlechs scatter in all directions.
Iggy guards her secrets
like a dragon guards its treasure.

—Keith Allen Daniels

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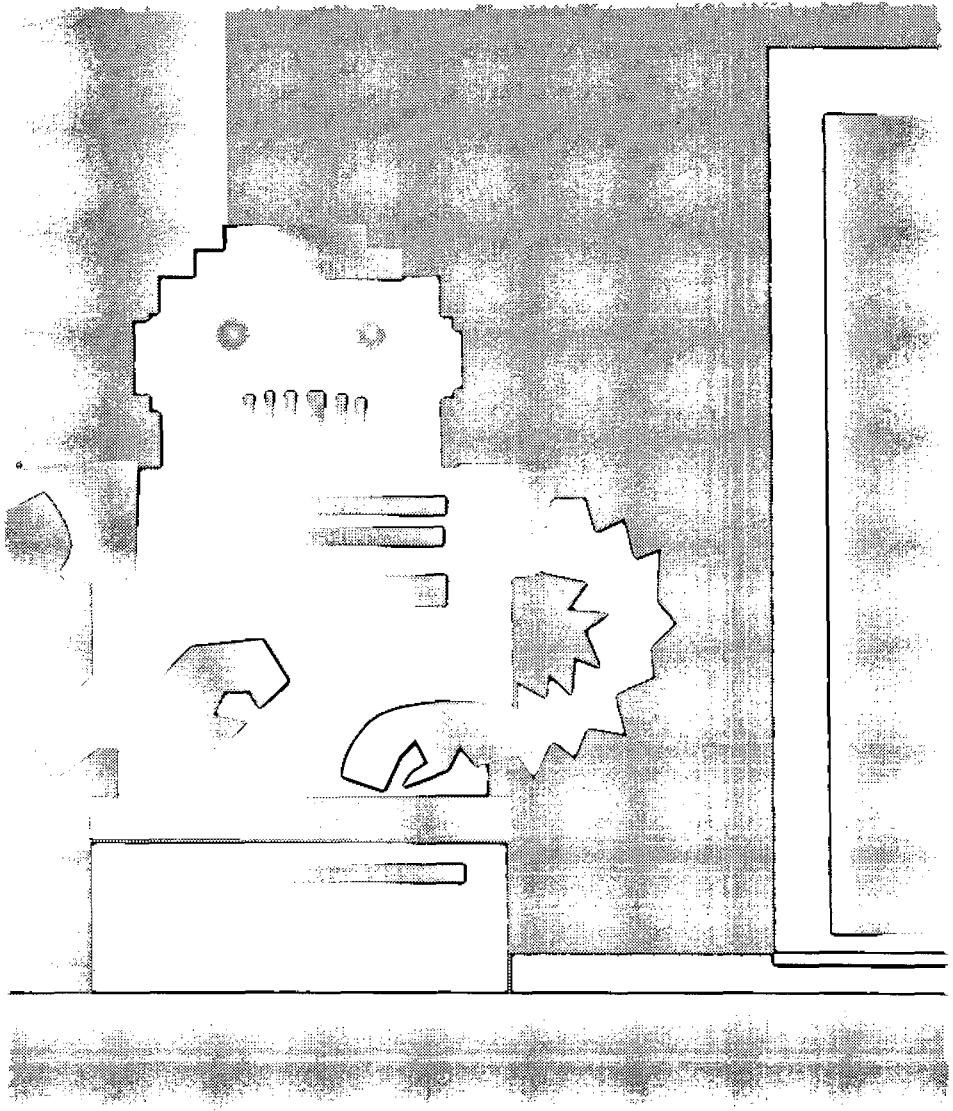

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BALANCE DUE

M. Shayne Bell

Illustration by June Levine

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There were no windows. That was what bothered Jameson most about the time they had brought him to. He could not understand why they didn't use windows anymore. He wanted to see the world again—to see if it was still green, if the sky was still blue, if flowers still bloomed—but none of the rooms he'd been taken to had had windows.

The robot lifted him gently forward and put a pillow behind his head. Its fingers felt cool, even through the warm gown he wore.

"Take me to a window," Jameson said. "We have time. We're early."

"Are you comfortable sitting now?" it asked.

Jameson looked into the robot's ruby eyes. "Yes, I'm comfortable—but I want to see the world."

"All that you see around you is part of the world."

"I want to see outside, beyond this building."

It paused. "I am not programmed to respond to that request," it said. It wheeled him to a gray, stone desk and left the room. That startled him. It

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had gone before he'd realized it was leaving. Since Jameson had first opened his new eyes, the robot had been the one thing that had never left him. It had always been there to help him. He knew it was just metal and sophisticated programming, but he felt very alone in that room after it had gone.

He waited. Burroughs Cryogenics had called a meeting to discuss his "balance due," which Jameson insisted was impossible. He had paid for the entire procedure four centuries before: the preservation of his brain after his body had finally died, the cloning of a new body, a cure for the cancer that had killed him. They had performed other procedures on his behalf, they insisted, procedures that hadn't existed—hadn't even been dreamed of—when he'd first lived, but which were now considered necessary, were required, even, by law. He was grateful to have had his DNA cleaned of all disease, certainly, to have had every part of him rendered perfect, to have had his immune system enhanced to nearly godlike ability, but they had drained his bank accounts to pay for all that.

And he had nothing left to pay them what they claimed was due.

And there were all the others still to come.

The door opened. A small man and a robot walked to the desk. The man sat down. The robot set a long, narrow safety-deposit box in front of Jameson and asked him to sign real papers declaring that he had authorized the bank to bring the safety-deposit box here. Jameson's hand was shaky, but he signed and the robot left. The robot had been real. Jameson didn't know if the man was real or a projection. He'd stopped touching people to find out.

The man never said hello. No one did anymore. He spoke a command, and a balance sheet shimmered in the air in front of Jameson. Jameson could still read balance sheets. Some things hadn't changed, he thought. It explained how his assets had been used to pay for the various procedures above and beyond what he had originally agreed to.

Jameson tried to ignore it. "I paid in full to be brought back," Jameson said.

"In twenty-first century dollars," the man said.

"A lot of twenty-first century dollars."

"It seemed so at the time, I'm sure, but—"

"What has your company found out about Rose?"

The man looked exasperated.

"And what about Ann, and Clayton, and Alice—where are they?" Jameson asked.

"We will talk about the money, but if you want this first I will tell you what I know." He spoke slowly. All the people Jameson had met here spoke slowly, as if he were a child or as if they were having trouble with the words. Only robots spoke at a normal pace. "We have no record of any of the people you have mentioned," the man said. "They were not clients of Burroughs Cryogenics."

"But I set up a trust to buy them the procedure." Them and all the others. When he'd found out he was dying, he'd sold stock and companies and left the people he'd loved the money they'd need to meet him in the future. He hadn't wanted to arrive there alone. He hadn't bought them the procedures—he'd imagined the technology would improve, that they would be able to buy plans better than his own. "What happened to them?"

"I don't know. The company does not know. There are research services available, but they cost, Mr. Jameson, and you have no money."

Jameson closed his eyes. He had been rich in his first life. Being destitute

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in this was beyond bearing. "I will be able to walk soon," he said. "I will enroll in the retraining programs and find work. If your claims for payment hold up after I obtain legal counsel, we will be forced to establish a payment plan. I have nothing else to offer."

"On the contrary, apparently you do have assets—at least, we hope you do." The man turned the safety-deposit box toward Jameson. "Do you remember what you stored here?"

Jameson thought for a moment, then remembered. He wanted to laugh. The man was hoping for bonds, perhaps, or many, many jewels.

"Do you remember the access code?" the man asked. "If not, the bank is prepared to open it for you."

"I remember."

Jameson leaned forward and spoke one word: "Rose." The box clicked. Jameson reached forward and fumbled with the top. The steel of it was cold, real to the touch.

And they were there. "Two hundred and thirty-seven photographs," Jameson said. He looked at the man's face expecting disappointment. Instead the man smiled. Jameson did not understand why.

He looked back at the photographs. He had wanted these remembrances of the life he was leaving. They hadn't recommended disks with thousands of photographs stored digitally—no one knew if the technology to read disks would still exist in the future—so he'd stored actual photographs in a temperature-controlled bank vault. The top photo was a picture of Rose smiling at him just after she'd opened her gifts on her thirty-third birthday. Wrapping paper and bows covered the floor around her. Below that photo were pictures of their son and daughter, his parents, her parents, friends, aunts, uncles, partners, professors.

"We need to have these appraised," the man said.

"They aren't for sale," Jameson said.

The man ignored him. He looked away into space, and after a moment a woman stood beside the desk. She never introduced herself. She never smiled. She was a projection, Jameson knew. She leaned over the desk and looked at the photographs Jameson had set out.

"These aren't for sale," Jameson said.

"You do not understand," the man said. "Photographs from your age are sometimes worth a great deal in this."

"I am not selling them."

"The courts will force you to sell. Your current financial state is untenable."

Jameson paused. "I suppose we could transfer these photographs to your equivalent of digital disks so I might have them in some form."

"No," the woman said. "Old photographs must be one of a kind if they are to retain their value. The purchasers will want complete copyright control."

The man insisted that Jameson show them all the photographs. That meant they would see the small box underneath them. Jameson hadn't been a complete fool, after all, but in the meantime it was the photographs, one by one. The woman insisted he wear white gloves to handle them, and it took Jameson some time to pull them on. The man never offered to help.

Some of the photographs were brittle. Some had faded. Fading could add to their value, the woman said. She had him put the photographs of the two dogs he'd owned in one pile. She had him set the photographs of anyone handsome or beautiful and who looked healthy in another.

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But she had him set the ones that showed the scar on Rose's cheek in a separate pile.

"We can speed this up, Mr. Jameson," she said. "Were any of the people you photographed maimed or sick?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Did they have birth defects, missing limbs, obvious illnesses, rashes."

She didn't need to mention scars.

"Like this one," she said, pointing at a photo of an office party. Andy was in it. He'd lost his left arm in the war.

Jameson pulled the box onto his lap. What was worth money and what wasn't was becoming clear to him. But the idea of making money off Rose's scar and Andy's lost arm made him ill. He took time setting the photograph of Andy on the desk.

"This one is worth a great deal," the woman said. She turned away and spoke words Jameson couldn't hear. After a moment she turned back. "Do you have any photographs of that man without his shirt on, or at least with what was left of his arm uncovered?"

Jameson glared at her. He put the picture of Andy back in the box, gathered up the others and closed the lid. "What is it you want?" he asked. "Photographs of freaks? None of these people were freaks. You won't find what you're looking for here."

There was an uncomfortable silence.

"But we already have," the woman said.

Balance sheets displayed in front of Jameson and the man at the desk.

"The figure on the left is what I will pay you for what you have shown me so far," the woman said.

"Excellent!" the man said.

Her payment would subtract a large amount from Burroughs Cryogenics' balance due—even Jameson could see that in the new money.

"Can you have this translated into twenty-first century dollars?" Jameson asked.

The man and woman looked at him. "Just ask for it," the man said after a moment.

Jameson asked. The balance sheet shimmered, disappeared for a moment, then redisplayed with new, much higher figures.

Jameson stared.

He owed Burroughs Cryogenics $2,347,153.62. The photographs so far were worth $512,298.43. "How can my photographs be worth so much?" he asked.

"Few photographs have survived from your time," the woman said. "They show things more recent projections do not."

Again, everyone was quiet. After a moment, Jameson spoke. "We can finish this appraisal," he said. "But before we go any further, I want legal counsel sitting here with me. I will want at least seven appraisals before I sell, some from auction houses—is Sotheby's still in existence?"

He had legal counsel the next day. It turned out the diamonds, rubies, and sapphires he had stored in the small box were worth less than the photographs. But Burroughs Cryogenics could not deny him legal counsel. He authorized the company to sell two diamonds and a sapphire for him and buy him his own used robot, programmed and certified to practice law—for him at least. He'd be its only client. Doing that was cheaper than retaining a human lawyer. They all met in the same room at the same desk.

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"Burroughs Cryogenics has put a lien against your robot," the man told him. "The value of it will go toward your balance due the day all sales are completed if you have not generated enough money to pay your bill in full."

"Burroughs Cryogenics' claims are legal and in order," the robot assured him. "The company is required to set up a payment plan only after you have divested yourself of all assets."

"I need time to study the situation," Jameson said. "Give me two weeks."

They gave him six days. Jameson intended to use them well. He wanted to prove Burroughs Cryogenics wrong. He wanted to find loopholes that would let him keep the photographs or use the money in other ways.

He would sell the photographs only if doing so would pay the additional fees to bring back Rose.

Jameson studied the ways of finding information in this age while the robot reviewed case law. It stood, never moving, in the center of his room. Finally, it turned to him.

"There is precedence," it said. "Ninety-three years ago, two district courts ruled that giving life to next of kin takes precedence over paying debt."

Jameson wanted to hug the robot, and he did wheel his chair to it to shake its hand. He could use the photographs to bring Rose back now—if he could find her before Burroughs Cryogenics forced him to pay his bill. He might owe a great deal, and he would have to pay what he owed in full, but he could do that over time.

He did not want to wait for Rose.

Each day he was stronger. Each day he could do more. He could swim now—not far, and swimming left him winded, but eight laps was more than he had yet done in this life. The robot physical therapists made no comments. They just helped him to and from the pool, handed him towels, helped him dry off if he was too winded to manage it himself. Once a week the projection of a human physical therapist had shimmered at poolside to check off his progress, but the man was all business, never friendly. He assured Jameson that soon he would be able to leave Burroughs Cryogenics to strike out on his own.

Soon. Everything was soon. Jameson was beginning to learn that soon in this age could mean quite a long time.

A robot knelt to dry Jameson's feet, but Jameson took the towel and dried them himself. "Can you contact the human physical therapist?" he asked.

The robot looked up. "Is something wrong?"

"No, but I need his permission to take a short trip."

To the Census Bureau. Everything cost, Jameson had learned. All information cost money—and the research services were, as he'd been warned, pricey. But if a person went to a bureau or library himself to do his own research, without using any service, the cost of searching for information about someone in the past was minimal.

The robot transmitted his request with a thought. "A reply will take a few moments," it said.

Jameson waited at poolside. Most of the robots left. Only his own robot stayed with him. It helped him into a robe. The water in the pool stilled.

And the physical therapist shimmered in front of him, suddenly. "It's too soon," he said. "I can't certify you for travel."

"I need only a short time," Jameson said. He told him about Rose and ex-

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plained about going to the Census Bureau. The man turned to speak to someone Jameson couldn't see. After a moment he turned back, shook his head no, and disappeared.

"What did he say to whomever he was speaking to?" Jameson asked. He knew robots read lips.

"I am not legally allowed to repeat human conversations," the robot said.

"Is it legal for Burroughs Cryogenics to keep me here?"

"It is not a question of legality. Your stamina and physical abilities are in question."

"Are humans still allowed freedom of movement?"

"Certainly."

"Are humans allowed to attempt activities others might consider beyond their abilities?"

"I do not understand your question."

"Do humans climb mountains? Scuba dive? Run rapids?"

"They do."

"Then if they are free to do those things, to put their lives, even, at risk, I am surely free to go to the Census Bureau for one afternoon. I want you to take me there."

The robot was silent. Considering? Jameson wondered.

"If the physical therapist's advice is not legally binding," Jameson said, "my instructions to you as your owner must take precedence."

Still the robot said nothing.

"I am scheduled to sleep every afternoon," Jameson said. "You know I have spent the last two afternoons studying instead. No one will miss me if I am gone those few hours."

The robot turned to him. "I have just finished downloading the public transportation programs. They are free, of course, or I would not have done so without your permission."

"Let's go now," Jameson said, and the robot helped him stand.

Jameson dressed himself, but he had to sit down afterward. He walked partway to the elevator, but when he slowed, the robot took his arm gently, without being asked. Jameson relied on its support more and more the farther they went.

The elevator opened into a vast room filled with opalescent ovals of metal and glass. Crowds of people and robots hurried there, and it was very noisy. The noise hurt Jameson's ears. The rooms he'd been in till now had all been nearly silent. Jameson covered his ears and stared at the people. Each was beautiful or handsome, all young.

"We are booked in unit 88762-10," the robot said. It guided Jameson to an oval not far from the elevator. "Open," the robot said, and the glass top retracted. There were two seats inside. Both looked the same. There was no steering wheel in front of one. The robot helped Jameson into the right-hand seat, still the passenger seat, Jameson thought. The robot sat in the other. "Close," it said and, as the top closed, restraints folded around Jameson and the robot and the robot said "Census Bureau."

And there was no building beneath them.

They were plunging through bright air between mountains of metal and stone. They banked across the surface of one building, and sunlight glared off the metal. Jameson could not look at it. He shaded his eyes, but he could not see the top of the building. Below them was a forest, and far, far off a riv-

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er. "Where are we?" he asked, and the robot named a city he'd never heard of.

They were in traffic—ovals all around them dove gracefully through the air, faster and faster, it seemed.

"Does the sight frighten you?" the robot asked. "Your heart is racing. I can blank the covering."

"My heart is racing because I am finally living again," Jameson said.

He watched the ovals fall and climb and race ahead.

Robots at the Census Bureau sent him from room to room, and his robot had to carry him. He was embarrassed, but too weak to walk. He saw no file cabinets, no papers, no books. If he listened closely, he could understand the few people. Here they spoke at a normal pace, and he realized just how much English had changed. A tall woman came out to him. She was as beautiful as models had been in his first life. She was the director—surprised to meet someone come in person to do research.

And they had records of Rose. Rose had lived eighty years beyond his death. Medical advances had given her a long life. She had remarried twice. Fifteen years after his death she had had another daughter.

Had she even wanted to meet him in the future? he wondered. Eighty years and two marriages was a long time.

"Was she cryogenically preserved?" he asked.

The records did not show.

The next morning, Sotheby's sent a projection with the best appraisal yet of his photographs. They expected to make enough from auction to pay the balance due and leave Jameson with the robot and a little money besides. The one photograph of Andy and the many photographs of Rose, and her scar, were worth most.

That morning, the robot told Jameson that ninety-seven companies specializing in cryogenic preservation had been in business the year Rose died. Since then, eighty-two had gone out of business or had merged with other companies.

"When a cryogenic company went out of business, what happened to the brains it held?" Jameson asked.

The robot did not hesitate. It told him the facts at once. "It attempted to sell its contracts to another cryogenic company," it said. "If no buyers were forthcoming, it invoked the Unforeseeable Events clause. The brains were donated to science or recycled."

Later that morning, Jameson stepped out of the shower and looked at his perfect new body in the full-length mirror. He recognized himself. The body was almost what he remembered having before. This one was young, late twenties, tanned. They had picked that skin color for him and told him he could change the pigment at any time, for a price. He hadn't told them that through all the years as he had grown older this was how he had seen himself—young, fit, tanned. The real surprises in those years of his other life had come when he'd looked in a mirror and seen someone looking back who was aging, losing hair, getting thinner. Still, this body wasn't quite right, either. For one thing, it was taller by half an inch. It had achieved its full genetic height. But that wasn't what made it look wrong. He studied his body, then realized what it was.

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Parts of his old body were missing. He looked closer at his left knee. He looked at his face, turned his hands over and over.

There were no scars.

His stomach had never been cut open. For all he knew, this body still had its appendix.

The water from the shower ran down his legs and cooled on his feet. He rubbed his knee. He had scarred it in his first life racing his sister Carol, she on a horse, he on a bike, faster and faster down the mile-long grid of roads that squared the Idaho farmland. The road hadn't been oiled, and he'd hit a patch of gravel that had sent him flying—scraping his hands and knees, leaving his left knee scarred. Years later, Carol had met him at the airport and reached up to touch the gash on his forehead that he'd taken when a rhino had bashed the side of his landrover in Tanzania.

He was cold now. He pulled the towel from the rack and dried himself.

He hadn't realized that scars, or the lack of them, carried memory.

He looked at his flat stomach, ran a finger along the skin where the scar had been. His mother had sat with him that first night in the hospital when his appendix had nearly ruptured and he had drifted in and out of the anesthetic. He'd been eight or nine years old. Her hands had felt cool on his forehead.

He turned away from the mirror.

And thought of Rose's scar. The automobile accident had nearly killed her. The robot assured him such accidents rarely happened now. Scars could always be healed.

His trip to the Census Bureau had worn Jameson out. He did not feel well enough to travel again for two days. He sent the robot to archives and libraries and bureaus on his behalf, but researching in person took time and the days he had to look were fading away. So he'd sold more jewels and paid the research fees and the information-use fees and hired various services to look for Rose and his children, his parents, his sisters and friends and family.

Some had died in accidents making it impossible to preserve their brains. Some had simply never had the procedure, he would never know why. His son Clayton, his mother and father and Andy had all been preserved by Osiris Laboratories, a company no longer in business. It would take time to track its mergers and buyouts and discover what had become of it. He could not find information about Carol, his daughter Ann, his Aunt Alice, Rose or her parents.

At least not at once.

Two days later, Jameson looked up from the pool on his sixteenth lap and saw the robot staring at nothing, its ruby eyes a shade brighter. It was receiving information. Jameson swam to the side and held himself there.

Finally, it looked at him.

"What have you learned?" he asked.

It told him at once. "The company that preserved your son, your mother and father, and Andy merged with another company two years after your son's death," the robot said. "That company was bought out by another, which went bankrupt in 2148. No other company purchased its contracts. Its assets were recycled."

The robot said nothing more. Jameson said nothing. He held onto the side

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of the pool, but could not climb out on his own. He could not ask for help. He could not speak.

Unexpectedly, the robot leaned over and held out a hand to him. Jameson wondered at the gesture. Robots did what they were told. They did only what they were told. Jameson looked around, but there was no one to tell it what to do. He took its hand, and it pulled him out of the pool. It helped him dry and put on a robe. It helped him walk back to his room.

He sat with his photographs that night and looked at each one. He held them in dim light so they wouldn't fade. He wanted to remember his mother's face, his father's hands, Andy's smile, everything about his son. But he looked at all the photographs, those of Rose, those of Alice and Ann, Mildred and Carol and Sam—even the dogs. The robot told him he must sleep, but he ignored it.

Ann and Alice had not had the procedure. Carol had died in an earthquake, others in a war. He listened to stories of people regenerated like himself who'd expected to meet other people from their times. Sometimes they did. Sometimes they didn't.

Sometimes those they'd loved had left letters for them. When they least expected it, a law firm would contact them and hand them a letter, or a bank would send them a key or a password to a safety-deposit box filled with letters. None ever came for Jameson.

Burroughs Cryogenics set a deadline for payment. Jameson knew he would be released after that. He was weak, still, but some days he felt well. His doctor told him the number of days he felt well would increase until finally feeling well would be all he'd ever know.

Jameson knew that he needed to keep swimming, keep working out, but in those days he and the robot just researched.

"Perhaps records of defunct cryogenic companies are preserved in museums," the robot suggested one night.

"Find them," Jameson said. They had already contacted every cryogenic company currently in existence and were waiting for replies. Jameson sat down and began combing archived newspapers, hardcopy and online, from each of the cities Rose had lived in. He found Rose's death notices. None so far mentioned cryogenic preservation. The research fees and the information-use fees kept mounting, and the money from the jewels was nearly gone.

After a time, Jameson noticed that the robot had sat in a chair. He did not know how long it had been sitting. "Are you all right?" he asked it.

"I am fine," it said, but it would not look at him.

Jameson knew, then. "Tell me," he said.

The robot hesitated this time. Jameson wondered if he had purchased a robot with faulty programming. "Rose and her parents had the procedure," it said finally.

"Where are they?" he asked.

"They contracted with the same company as your son. I found its client list archived at the National Technology Museum, along with the company's other papers."

Jameson stood, sat again, then stood.

"Osiris Laboratories was considered the best in its day," the robot said.

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Jameson opened the box of photographs, then closed it. He held onto his chair. The robot watched him, but did nothing more.

In the night, Jameson needed to talk to someone, and there was no one but the robot. "Do you feel?" he asked it.

"The sensory programs in my fingertips allow me to—"

"No. Do you feel kindness, empathy, concern? There have been times when I've believed that you do."

"A robot's responses fall along an adjustable human-nonhuman scale," the robot said.

"Have you adjusted that scale to the human end?" Jameson asked.

The robot knelt in front of him. Panels in its back slid open right and left. Brilliant circuitry glittered there in all colors. A tiny lever began to flash white. Jameson could see the groove it moved in. It had moved quite far to the left. "Two things determine how machine-like or how human a robot's responses seem," the robot said. "A human might adjust the range, moving the highlighted lever to the right or to the left, or the cumulative effect of my own choices over time move the lever. No human has ever adjusted my response scale since I was created. As my current owner, you have the right to do so."

Jameson knew then how different the robot was from a man or a woman. No human would ever offer to let someone take away all that made them who they were. "I will not change you," Jameson said. "Please close your back."

The robot put a hand on the floor to steady itself and turned to look at Jameson with its ruby eyes. The panels in its back closed.

It sat, and they talked.

In the morning, Jameson and the robot took the photographs to Sotheby's. Their offices were at the base of one of the human-built mountains. Sotheby's offices had windows, so Jameson knew this part of the building was old. The windows looked out on a great, dark forest that had grown between the buildings. The people at Sotheby's were in a hurry. The auction would take place as quickly as they could scan the photographs into their catalogs. If he kept even one picture of Rose, he would not have enough to pay Burroughs Cryogenics and the research services. He let them all go.

He and the robot walked into the forest. It was cool there, and fragrant. Bird song trilled around them. Light filtered down through the forest canopy ten stories above. Other people walked there. Jameson followed one couple into an art gallery. He and the robot walked from there to another. The robot told him galleries filled this area. Artistic businesses clustered at the bases of the buildings. Rents were cheaper.

In one crowded gallery there were photographs for sale. They were from Jameson's time. Most were of people with physical defects. Two had birthmarks on their faces. One man was missing a finger. Some of the men were bald.

A woman walked up to him. "Are you a collector?" she asked.

"I was once," Jameson said.

The woman let him wander. He knew it was a foolish hope, but he wondered if he would see someone he'd known. A couple ahead of him started giggling. "Look at her," the girl whispered, pointing at a photograph on display.

Jameson stood behind them and looked at the photograph. It showed a

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group of four women standing in front of a car. One of them had a cold. Her nose was red, and she was holding a handkerchief. They were all smiling.

"She's so disgusting," the girl whispered.

"You don't understand," Jameson said.

The girl and boy looked at him. He felt embarrassed then. He suddenly knew he had no right to lecture these people. It was wonderful, really, that they would never know what colds were, or scars. He considered walking away.

"What do you mean?" the girl asked.

Jameson hesitated, but finally told them. He pointed at the woman with the cold. "That woman is actually very brave," he said. "She doesn't feel well, yet she's gone out to try to have fun with her friends. It takes a certain courage to keep going when you don't feel well."

The girl looked back at the photograph, then she and the boy walked away. They did not look at him.

Jameson stepped up to the photograph to look at it more closely. He wondered who these people had been, how they had lived their lives. The placard below gave their names and described the woman's medical condition. It made a cold sound very grave. He looked back at the photo and realized there was more than a type of courage displayed there. There was also love. Everyone in the photo knew the woman with the cold could infect them. They didn't care. They wanted her with them. They took the chance.

Jameson looked around at all the perfect people in the gallery, and he had to leave. "Help me out," he said to the robot, and it took his arm. It led him to a bench deep in the trees. They were alone there. Both of them sat on the bench.

"I'll buy them all back," Jameson said.

"What do you mean?" the robot asked.

"I'll work, I'll make money again, and I'll buy back all of Rose's photographs."

The robot said nothing.

"Can you track the sale?" Jameson asked.

The robot grew very still. "You have money now," it said. "The sale is in progress."

"Buy the programs you need to track it. Remember who buys the photographs."

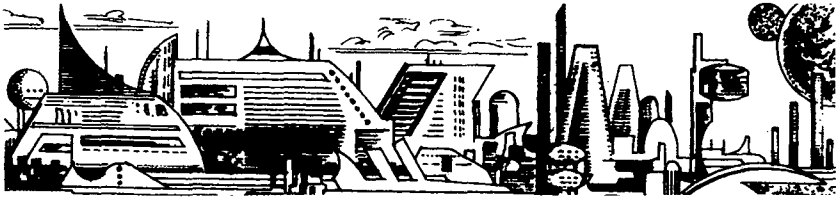
The robot's ruby eyes glowed.

When they left the forest, it was night. Jameson could not tell if he saw stars above him or other ovals with other people and robots in them.

He sat for a time in his room. It was all the home he had known in this life, and it was cold and small.

"You must sleep," the robot said, and Jameson did sleep.

He did not dream. O



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"Path of the Dragon" is set in George R.R. Martin's epic *Song of Fire and Ice* series. A previous novella in the same milieu, "Blood of the Dragon" (*Asimov's*, July 1996) was a Hugo award winner. The American hardcover edition of *A Storm of Swords*, the third volume in this fantasy series, will be out from Bantam next month. Mr. Martin is a multiple Hugo- and Nebula-award-winning author and "a projects kid from Bayonne, New Jersey, who now lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico, with two cats, a big dog, and the lovely Parris." He will soon be starting the fourth volume of his spellbinding saga.

PATH OF THE DRAGON

George R.R. Martin

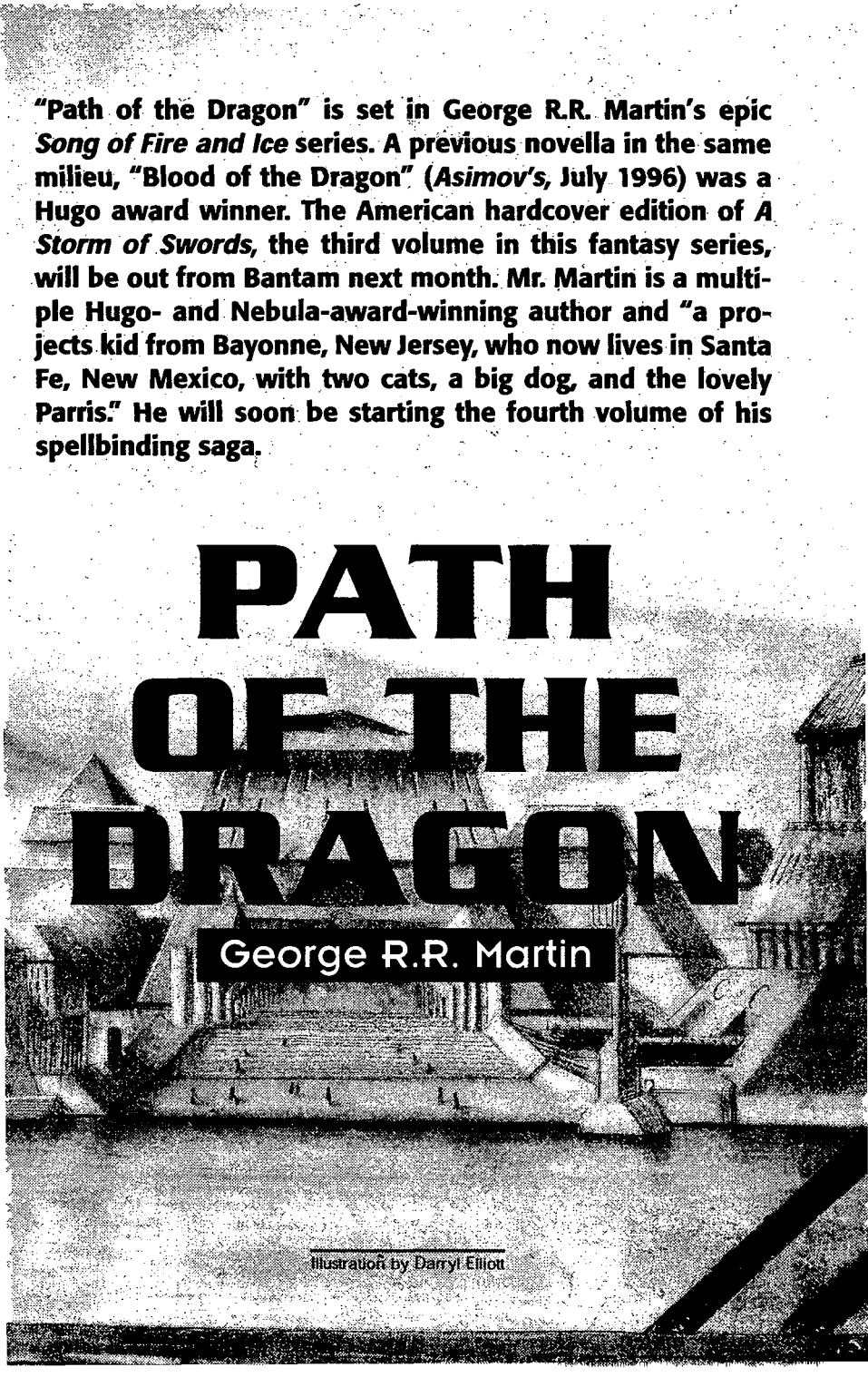

Illustration by Darryl Elliott

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A QUEEN AT SEA

Across the still blue water came the slow steady beat of drums, and the soft swish of oars from the galleys. The great cog groaned in their wake, the heavy lines stretched taut between. *Balerion*'s sails hung limp, drooping forlorn from the masts. Yet even so, as she stood upon the forecastle watching her dragons chase each other across a cloudless blue sky, Daenerys Targaryen was as happy as she could ever remember being.

Her Dothraki called the sea *the poison water*, distrusting any liquid that their horses could not drink. On the day the three ships had lifted anchor at Qarth, you would have thought they were sailing to hell instead of Pentos. Her brave young bloodriders had stared off at the dwindling coastline with huge white eyes, each of the three determined to show no fear before the other two, while her handmaids Irri and Jhiqui clutched the rail desperately and retched over the side at every little swell. The rest of Dany's tiny *khalasar* remained below decks, preferring the company of their nervous horses to the terrifying landless world about the ships. When a sudden squall had enveloped them six days into the voyage, she heard them through the hatches; the horses kicking and screaming, the riders praying in thin quavery voices each time *Balerion* heaved or swayed.

No squall could frighten Dany, though. *Daenerys Stormborn*, she was called, for she had come howling into the world on distant Dragonstone as the greatest storm in the memory of Westeros howled outside, a storm so fierce that it ripped gargoyles from the castle walls and smashed her father's fleet to kindling.

The narrow sea was often stormy, and Dany had crossed it half a hundred times as a girl, running from one Free City to the next half a step ahead of the Usurper's hired knives. She loved the sea. She liked the sharp salty smell of sea air, and the vastness of limitless empty horizons bounded only by a vault of azure sky above. It made her feel very small, but free as well. She liked the dolphins that sometimes swam along beside *Balerion*, slicing through the waves like silvery spears, and the flying fish they glimpsed now and again. She even liked the sailors, with all their songs and stories. Once on a voyage to Braavos, as she'd watched the crew wrestle down a great green sail in a rising gale, she had even thought how fine it would be to be a sailor. But when she told her brother, Viserys had twisted her hair until she cried. "You are blood of the dragon," he had screamed at her. "A *dragon*, not some smelly fish."

He was a fool about that, and so much else, Dany thought. *If he had been wiser and more patient, it would be him sailing west to take the throne that was his by rights.* Viserys had been stupid and vicious, she had come to realize, and yet sometimes she missed him all the same. Not the cruel weak man he had become, by the end, but the brother who had once read to her and sometimes let her creep into his bed at night, the boy who used to tell her tales of the Seven Kingdoms, and talk of how much better their lives would be when he became a king.

The captain appeared at her elbow. "Would that this *Balerion* could soar as her namesake did, Your Grace," he said politely, in bastard Valyrian heavily flavored with accent of Pentos. "Then we should not need to row, nor tow, nor pray for wind. Is it not so?"

"It is so, Captain," she answered with a smile, pleased to have won the man over. Captain Groleo was an old Pentoshi like his master, Illyrio

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Mopatis, and he had been nervous as a maiden about carrying three dragons on his ship. Half a hundred buckets of seawater still hung from the gunwales, in case of fires. At first Groleo had wanted the dragons caged and Dany had consented to put his fears at ease, but their misery was so palpable that she soon changed her mind and insisted they be freed.

Even Captain Groleo was glad of that, now. There had been one small fire, easily extinguished; against that, *Balerion* suddenly seemed to have far fewer rats than she'd had before, when she sailed under the name *Saduleon*. And her crew, once as fearful as they were curious, had begun to take a queer fierce pride in "their" dragons. Every man of them, from captain to cook's boy, loved to watch the three fly . . . though none so much as Dany.

They are my children, she told herself, *and if the maegi spoke truly, they are the only children I am ever like to have.*

Viserion's scales were the color of fresh cream, his horns, wing bones, and spinal crest a dark gold that flashed bright as metal in the sun. Rhaegal was made of the green of summer and the bronze of fall. They soared above the ships in wide circles, higher and higher, each trying to climb above the other.

Dragons always preferred to attack from above, Dany had learned. Should either get between the other and the sun, he would fold his wings and dive screaming, and they would tumble from the sky locked together in a tangled scaly ball, jaws snapping and tails lashing. The first time they had done it, she feared that they meant to kill each other, but it was only sport. No sooner would they splash into the sea than they would break apart and rise again, shrieking and hissing, the salt water steaming off them as their wings clawed at the air. Drogon was aloft as well, though not in sight; he would be miles ahead, or miles behind, hunting.

He was always hungry, her Drogon. *Hungry and growing fast. Another year, or perhaps two, and he may be large enough to ride. Then I shall have no need of ships to cross the great salt sea.*

But that time was not yet come. Rhaegal and Viserion were the size of small dogs, Drogon only a little larger, and any dog would have outweighed them; they were all wings and neck and tail, lighter than they looked. And so Daenerys Targaryen must rely on wood and wind and canvas to bear her home.

The wood and the canvas had served her well enough so far, but the fickle wind had turned traitor. For six days and six nights they had been becalmed, and now a seventh day had come, and still no breath of air to fill their sails. Fortunately, two of the ships that Magister Illyrio had sent after her were trading galleys, with two hundred oars apiece and crews of strong-armed oarsmen to row them. But the great cog *Balerion* was a song of a different key; a ponderous broad-beamed sow of a ship with immense holds and huge sails, but helpless in a calm. *Vhagar* and *Meraxes* had let out lines to tow her, but it made for painfully slow going. All three ships were crowded, and heavily laden.

"I cannot see Drogon," said Ser Jorah Mormont, as he joined her on the forecastle. "Is he lost again?"

"We are the ones who are lost, ser. Drogon has no taste for this wet creeping, no more than I do." Bolder than the other two, her black dragon had been the first to try his wings above the water, the first to flutter from ship to ship, the first to lose himself in a passing cloud . . . and the first to kill. The flying fish no sooner broke the surface of the water than they were en-

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veloped in a lance of flame, snatched up, and swallowed. "How big will he grow?" Dany asked curiously. "Do you know?"

"In the Seven Kingdoms, there are tales of dragons who grew so huge that they could pluck giant krakens from the sea."

Dany laughed. "That would be a wondrous sight to see."

"It is only a tale, *Khaleesi,*" said her exile knight. "They talk of wise old dragons living a thousand years as well."

"Well, how long *does* a dragon live?" She looked up as Viserion swooped low over the ship, his wings beating slowly and stirring the limp sails.

Ser Jorah shrugged. "A dragon's natural span of days is many times as long as a man's, or so the songs would have us believe . . . but the dragons the Seven Kingdoms knew best were those of House Targaryen. They were bred for war, and in war they died. It is no easy thing to slay a dragon, but it can be done."

The squire Whitebeard, standing by the figurehead with one lean hand curled about his tall hardwood staff, turned toward them and said, "Balerion the Black Dread was two hundred years old when he died during the reign of Jaehaerys the Conciliator. He was so large he could swallow an aurochs whole. A dragon never stops growing, Your Grace, so long as he has food and freedom." His name was Arstan, but Strong Belwas had named him Whitebeard for his pale whiskers, and most everyone called him that now. He was taller than Ser Jorah, though not so muscular; his eyes were a pale blue, his long beard as white as snow and as fine as silk.

"Freedom?" asked Dany, curious. "What do you mean?"

"In King's Landing, your ancestors raised an immense domed castle for their dragons. The Dragonpit, it is called. It still stands atop the Hill of Rhaenys, though all in ruins now. That was where the royal dragons dwelt in days of yore, and a cavernous dwelling it was, with iron doors so wide that thirty knights could ride through them abreast. Yet even so, it was noted that none of the pit dragons ever reached the size of their ancestors. The maesters say it was because of the walls around them, and the great dome above their heads."

"If walls could keep us small, peasants would all be tiny and kings as large as giants," said Ser Jorah. "I've seen huge men born in hovels, and dwarfs who dwelt in castles."

"Men are men," Whitebeard replied. "Dragons are dragons."

Ser Jorah snorted his disdain. "How profound." The exile knight had no love for the old man, he'd made that plain from the first. "What do you know of dragons, anyway?"

"Little enough, that's true. Yet I served for a time in King's Landing in the days when King Aerys sat the Iron Throne, and walked beneath the dragonskulls that looked down from the walls of his throne room."

"Viserys talked of those skulls," said Dany. "The Usurper took them down and hid them away. He could not bear them looking down on him as he sat his stolen throne." She beckoned Whitebeard closer. "Did you ever meet my royal father?" King Aerys II had died before his daughter was born.

"I had that great honor, Your Grace."

Dany put a hand on the old man's arm. "Did you find him good and gentle?"

Whitebeard did his best to hide his feelings, but they were there, plain on his face. "His Grace was . . . often pleasant."

"Often?" Dany smiled. "But not always?"

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"He could be very harsh to those he thought his enemies."

"A wise man never makes an enemy of a king," said Dany. "Did you know my brother Rhaegar as well?"

"It was said that no man ever knew Prince Rhaegar, truly. I had the privilege of seeing him in tourney, though, and often heard him play his harp with its silver strings."

Ser Jorah snorted. "Along with a thousand others at some harvest feast. Next you'll claim you squired for him."

"I make no such claim, ser. Myles Mooton was Prince Rhaegar's squire, and Richard Lonmouth after him. When they won their spurs, he knighted them himself, and they remained his close companions. Young Lord Connington was dear to the prince as well, though his oldest friend was Arthur Dayne."

"The Sword of the Morning!" said Dany, delighted. "Viserys used to talk about his wondrous white blade. He said Ser Arthur was the only knight in the realm who was our brother's peer."

Whitebeard bowed his head. "It is not my place to question the words of Prince Viserys."

"King," Dany corrected. "He was a king, though he never reigned. Viserys, the Third of His Name. But what do you mean?" His answer had not been the one she'd expected. "Ser Jorah named Rhaegar the last dragon once. He had to have been a peerless warrior to be called that, surely?"

"Your Grace," said Whitebeard, "the Prince of Dragonstone was a most puissant warrior, but . . ."

"Go on," she urged. "You may speak freely to me."

"As you command." The old man leaned upon his hardwood staff, his brow furrowed. "A warrior without peer . . . those are fine words, Your Grace, but words win no battles."

"Swords win battles," Ser Jorah said bluntly. "And Prince Rhaegar knew how to use one."

"He did, ser. But . . . I have seen a hundred tournaments and more wars than I would wish, and however strong or fast or skilled a knight may be, there are others who can match him. A man will win one tourney, and fall quickly in the next. A slick spot in the grass may mean defeat, or what you ate for supper the night before. A change in the wind may bring the gift of victory." He glanced at Ser Jorah. "Or a lady's favor knotted round an arm."

Mormont's face darkened. "Be careful what you say, old man."

Arstan had seen Ser Jorah fight at Lannisport, Dany knew, in the tourney Mormont had won with a lady's favor knotted round his arm. He had won the lady too; Lynesse of House Hightower, his second wife, highborn and beautiful . . . but she had ruined him, and abandoned him, and the memory of her was bitter to him now. "Be gentle, my knight." She put a hand on Jorah's arm. "Arstan had no wish to give offense, I'm certain."

"As you say, *Khaleesi*." Ser Jorah's voice was grudging.

Dany turned back to the squire. "I know little of Rhaegar. Only the tales Viserys told, and he was a little boy when our brother died. What was he truly like?"

The old man considered a moment. "Able. That above all. Determined, deliberate, dutiful, single-minded. There is a tale told of him . . . but doubtless Ser Jorah knows it as well."

"I would hear it from you."

"As you wish," said Whitebeard. "As a young boy, the Prince of Dragon-

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stone was bookish to a fault. He was reading so early that men said Queen Rhaella must have swallowed some books and a candle whilst he was in her womb. Rhaegar took no interest in the play of other children. The maesters were awed by his wits, but his father's knights would jest sourly that Baelor the Blessed had been born again. Until one day Prince Rhaegar found something in his scrolls that changed him. No one knows what it might have been, only that the boy suddenly appeared early one morning in the yard as the knights were donning their steel. He walked up to Ser Willem Darry, the master-at-arms, and said, 'I will require sword and armor. It seems I must be a warrior.'"

"And he was!" said Dany, delighted.

"He was indeed." Whitebeard bowed. "My pardons, Your Grace. We speak of warriors, and I see that Strong Belwas has arisen. I must attend him."

Dany glanced aft. The eunuch was climbing through the hold amidships, nimble as a monkey for all his size. Belwas was squat but broad, a good fifteen stone of fat and muscle, his great brown gut crisscrossed by faded white scars. He wore baggy pants, a yellow silk bellyband, and an absurdly tiny leather vest dotted with iron studs. "Strong Belwas is hungry!" he roared at everyone and no one in particular. "Strong Belwas will eat now!" Turning, he spied Arstan on the forecastle. "Whitebeard!" he shouted. "You will bring food for Strong Belwas!"

"You may go," Dany told the squire. He bowed again, and moved off to tend the needs of the man he served.

Ser Jorah watched with a frown on his blunt honest face. Mormont was big and burly, strong of jaw and thick of shoulder. Not a handsome man by any means, but as true a friend as Dany had ever known. "You would be wise to take that old man's words well salted," he told her when Whitebeard was out of earshot.

"A queen must listen to all," she reminded him. "The highborn and the low, the strong and the weak, the noble and the venal. One voice may speak you false, but in many there is always truth to be found." She had read that in a book.

"Hear my voice then, Your Grace," the exile said. "This Arstan Whitebeard is playing you false. He is too old to be a squire, and too well-spoken to be serving that oaf of a eunuch."

That does seem queer, Dany had to admit. Strong Belwas was an ex-slave, bred and trained in the fighting pits of Meereen. Magister Illyrio had sent him to guard her, or so Belwas claimed, and it was true that she needed guarding. She had death behind her, and death ahead. The Usurper on his Iron Throne had offered land and lordship to any man who killed her. One attempt had been made already, with a cup of poisoned wine. The closer she came to Westeros, the more likely another attack became. Back in Qarth, the warlock Pyat Pree had sent a Sorrowful Man after her to avenge the Undying she'd burned in their House of Dust. Warlocks never forgot a wrong, it was said, and the Sorrowful Men never failed to kill. Most of the Dothraki would be against her as well. Khal Drogo's *kos* led *khalasars* of their own now, and none of them would hesitate to attack her own little band on sight, to slay and slave her people and drag Dany herself back to Vaes Dothrak to take her proper place among the withered crones of the *dosh khaleen*. She *hoped* that Xaro Xhoan Daxos was not an enemy, but the Qartheen merchant had coveted her dragons. And there was Quaithe of the Shadow, that strange woman in the red lacquer mask with all her cryptic

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counsel. Was she an enemy too, or only a dangerous friend? Dany could not say.

Ser Jorah saved me from the poisoner, and Arstan Whitebeard from the manticore. Perhaps Strong Belwas will save me from the next. He was huge enough, with arms like small trees and a great curved *arakh* so sharp he might have shaved with it, in the unlikely event of hair sprouting on those smooth brown cheeks. Yet he was childlike as well. *As a protector, he leaves much to be desired. Thankfully, I have Ser Jorah and my bloodriders. And my dragons, never forget.* In time, the dragons would be her most formidable guardians, just as they had been for Aegon and his sisters three hundred years ago. Just now, though, they brought her more danger than protection. In all the world there were but three living dragons, and those were hers; they were a wonder, and a terror, and beyond price.

She was pondering her next words when she felt a cool breath on the back of her neck, and a loose strand of her silver-gold hair stirred against her brow. Above, the canvas creaked and moved, and suddenly a great cry went up from all over *Balerion*. "Wind!" the sailors shouted. "The wind returns, the *wind!*

Dany looked up to where the great cog's sails rippled and belled, as the lines thrummed and tightened and sang the sweet song they had missed so for six long days. Captain Groleo rushed aft, shouting commands. The Pentoshi were scrambling up the masts, those that were not cheering. Even Strong Belwas let out a great bellow and did a little dance. "The gods are good!" Dany said. "You see, Jorah? We are on our way once more."

"Yes," he said, "but to what, my queen?"

All day the wind blew, steady from the east at first, and then in wild gusts. The sun set in a blaze of red. *I am still half a world from Westeros,* Dany told herself as she charred meat for her dragons that evening, *but every hour brings me closer.* She tried to imagine what it would feel like, when she first caught sight of the land she was born to rule. *It will be as fair a shore* as *I have ever seen, I know it. How could it be otherwise?*

But later that night, as *Balerion* plunged onward through the dark and Dany sat crosslegged on her bunk in the captain's cabin, feeding her dragons— "Even upon the sea," Groleo had said, so graciously, "queens take precedence over captains"—a sharp knock came upon the door.

Irri had been sleeping at the foot of her bunk (it was too narrow for three, and tonight was Jhiqui's turn to share the soft featherbed with her *khaleesi*), but she roused at the knock and went to the door. Dany pulled up a coverlet and tucked it in under her arms. She slept naked, and had not expected a caller at this hour. "Come," she said when she saw Ser Jorah standing without, beneath a swaying lantern.

The exile knight ducked his head as he entered. "Your Grace. I am sorry to disturb your sleep."

"I was not sleeping, ser. Come and watch." She took a chunk of salt pork out of the bowl in her lap and held it up for her dragons to see. All three of them eyed it hungrily. Rhaegal spread green wings and stirred the air, and Viserion's neck swayed back and forth like a long pale snake's as he followed the movement of her hand. "Drogon," Dany said softly, "*dracarys.*" And she tossed the pork in the air.

Drogon moved quicker than a striking cobra. Flame roared from his mouth, orange and scarlet and black, searing the meat before it began to fall. As his sharp black teeth snapped shut around it, Rhaegal's head darted

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close, as if to steal the prize from his brother's jaws, but Drogon swallowed and screamed, and the smaller green dragon could only *hiss* in frustration.

"Stop that, Rhaegal," Dany said in annoyance, giving his head a swat. "You had the last one. I'll have no greedy dragons." She smiled at Ser Jorah. "I don't need to char their meat over a brazier any longer."

"So I see. *Dracarys?*"

All three dragons turned their heads at the sound of that word, and Viserion let loose with a blast of pale gold flame that made Ser Jorah take a hasty step backward. Dany giggled. "Be careful with that word, ser, or they're like to singe your beard off. It means *dragonfire* in High Valyrian. I wanted to choose a command that no one was like to utter by chance."

Mormont nodded. "Your Grace," he said, "I wonder if I might have a few private words?"

"Of course. Irri, leave us for a bit." She put a hand on Jhiqui's bare shoulder and shook the other handmaid awake. "You as well, sweetling. Ser Jorah needs to talk to me."

"Yes, *Khaleesi.*" Jhiqui tumbled from the bunk, naked and yawning, her thick black hair tumbled about her head. She dressed quickly and left with Irri, closing the door behind them.

Dany gave the dragons the rest of the salt pork to squabble over, and patted the bed beside her. "Sit, good ser, and tell me what is troubling you."

"Three things." Ser Jorah sat. "Strong Belwas. This Arstan Whitebeard. And Illyrio Mopatis, who sent them."

Again? Dany pulled the coverlet higher and tugged one end over her shoulder. "And why is that?"

"The warlocks in Qarth told you that you would be betrayed three times," the exile knight reminded her, as Viserion and Rhaegal began to snap and claw at each other for the last chunk of seared salt pork.

"Once for blood and once for gold and once for love." Dany was not like to forget. "Mirri Maz Duur was the first."

"Which means two traitors yet remain . . . and now these two appear. I find that troubling, yes. Never forget, Robert offered a lordship to the man who slays you."

Dany leaned forward and yanked Viserion's tail, to pull him off his green brother. Her blanket fell away from her chest as she moved. She grabbed it hastily and covered herself again. "The Usurper is dead," she said.

"But his son rules in his place." Ser Jorah lifted his gaze, and his dark eyes met her own. "A dutiful son pays his father's debts. Even blood debts."

"This boy Joffrey might want me dead . . . if he recalls that I'm alive. What has that to do with Belwas and Arstan Whitebeard? The old man does not even wear a sword. You've seen that."

"Aye. And I have seen how deftly he handles that staff of his. Recall how he killed that manticore in Qarth? It might as easily have been your throat he crushed."

"Might have been, but was not," she pointed out. "It was a stinging manticore meant to slay me. He saved my life."

"*Khaleesi,* has it occurred to you that Whitebeard and Belwas might have been in league with the assassin? It might all have been a ploy to win your trust."

Her sudden laughter made Drogon *hiss,* and sent Viserion flapping to his perch above the porthole. "The ploy worked well."

The exile knight did not return her smile. "These are Illyrio's ships, Il-

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lyrio's captains, Illyrio's sailors . . . and Strong Belwas and Arstan are his men as well, not yours."

"Magister Illyrio has protected me in the past. Strong Belwas says that he wept when he heard my brother was dead."

"Yes," said Mormont, "but did he weep for Viserys, or for the plans he had made with him?"

"His plans need not change. Magister Illyrio is a friend to House Targaryen, and wealthy . . ."

"He was not born wealthy. In the world as I have seen it, no man grows rich by kindness. The warlocks said the second treason would be for *gold*. What does Illyrio Mopatis love more than gold?"

"His skin." Across the cabin Drogon stirred, steam rising from his nostrils. "Mirri Maz Duur betrayed me. I burned her for it."

"Mirri Maz Duur was in your power. In Pentos, you shall be in Illyrio's power. It is not the same. I know the magister as well as you. He is a devious man, and clever—"

"I need clever men about me if I am to win the Iron Throne."

Ser Jorah snorted. "That wineseller who tried to poison you was a clever man as well. Clever men hatch ambitious schemes."

Dany drew her legs up beneath the blanket. "You will protect me. You, and my bloodriders."

"Four men? *Khaleesi,* you believe you know Illyrio Mopatis, very well. Yet you insist on surrounding yourself with men you do *not* know, like this puffed-up eunuch and the world's oldest squire. Take a lesson from Pyat Pree and Xaro Xhoan Daxos."

He means well, Dany reminded herself. *He does all he does for love.* "It seems to me that a queen who trusts no one is as foolish as a queen who trusts everyone. Every man I take into my service is a risk, I understand that, but how am I to win the Seven Kingdoms without such risks? Am I to conquer Westeros with one exile knight and three Dothraki bloodriders?"

His jaw set stubbornly. "Your path is dangerous, I will not deny that. But if you blindly trust in every liar and schemer who crosses it, you will end as your brothers did."

His obstinance made her angry. *He treats me like some child.* "Strong Belwas could not scheme his way to breakfast. And what lies has Arstan Whitebeard told me?"

"He is not what he pretends to be. He speaks to you more boldly than any squire would dare."

"He spoke frankly at my command. He knew my brother."

"A great many men knew your brother. Your Grace, in Westeros the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard sits on the small council, and serves the king with his wits as well as his steel. If I am the first of your Queensguard, I pray you, hear me out. I have a plan to put to you."

"What plan? Tell me."

"Illyrio Mopatis wants you back in Pentos, under his roof. Very well, go to him . . . but in your own time, and not alone. Let us see how loyal and obedient these new subjects of yours truly are. Command Groleo to change course for Slaver's Bay."

Dany was not certain she liked the sound of that at all. Everything she'd ever heard of the flesh marts in the great slave cities of Yunkai, Meereen, and Astapor was dire and frightening. "What is there for me in Slaver's Bay?"

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"An army," said Ser Jorah. "If Strong Belwas is so much to your liking you can buy hundreds more like him out of the fighting pits of Meereen . . . but it is Astapor I'd set my sails for. In Astapor you can buy Unsullied."

"The slaves in the spiked bronze hats?" Dany had seen Unsullied guards in the Free Cities, posted at the gates of magisters, archons, and dynasts. "Why should I want Unsullied? They don't even ride horses, and most of them are fat."

"The Unsullied you may have seen in Pentos and Myr were household guards. That's soft service, and eunuchs tend to plumpness in any case. Food is the only vice allowed them. To judge all Unsullied by a few old household slaves is like judging all squires by Arstan Whitebeard, Your Grace. Most are strong, and skilled, and supremely disciplined. Put ashore in Astapor and continue on to Pentos overland. It will take longer, yes . . . but when you break bread with Magister Illyrio, you will have a thousand swords behind you, not just four."

There is wisdom in this, yes, Dany thought, *but* . . . "How am I to buy a thousand slave soldiers? All I have of value is the crown the Tourmaline Brotherhood gave me."

"Dragons will be as great a wonder in Astapor as they were in Qarth. It may be that the slavers will shower you with gifts, as the Qartheen did. If not . . . these ships carry more than your Dothraki and their horses. They took on trade goods at Qarth, I've been through the holds and seen for myself. Bolts of silk and bales of tiger skin, amber and jade carvings, saffron, myrrh . . . slaves are cheap, Your Grace. Tiger skins are costly."

"Those are *Illyrio's* tiger skins," she objected.

"And Illyrio is a friend to House Targaryen."

"All the more reason not to steal his goods."

"What use are wealthy friends if they will not put their wealth at your disposal, my queen? If Magister Illyrio would deny you, he is only Xaro Xhoan Daxos with four chins. And if he is sincere in his devotion to your cause, he will not begrudge you three shiploads of trade goods. What better use for his tiger skins than to buy you the beginnings of an army?"

That's true. Dany felt a rising excitement. "There will be dangers on such a long march. . . ."

"There are dangers at sea as well. Corsairs and pirates hunt the southern route, and north of Valyria the Smoking Sea is demon haunted. The next storm could sink or scatter us, a kraken could pull us under . . . or we might find ourselves becalmed again, and die of thirst as we wait for the wind to rise. A march will have different dangers, my queen, but none greater."

"What if Captain Groleo refuses to change course, though? And Arstan, Strong Belwas, what will they do?"

Ser Jorah stood. "Perhaps it's time you found that out."

"*Yes!*" she decided. "I'll do it!" Dany threw back the coverlets and hopped from the bunk. "I'll see the captain at once, command him to set course for Astapor." She bent over her chest, threw open the lid, and seized the first garment to hand, a pair of loose sandsilk trousers. "Hand me my medallion belt," she commanded Jorah, as she pulled the sandsilk up over her hips. "And my vest—" she started to say, turning.

Ser Jorah slid his arms around her.

"Oh," was all Dany had time to say, as he pulled her close and pressed his lips down on hers. He smelled of sweat and salt and leather, and the iron studs on his jerkin dug into her naked breasts as he crushed her hard

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against him. One hand held her by the shoulder while the other slid down her spine to the small of her back, and her mouth opened for his tongue, though she never told it to. *His beard is scratchy,* she thought, *but his mouth is sweet.* The Dothraki wore no beards, only long mustaches, and only Khal Drogo had ever kissed her before. *He should not be doing this. I am his queen, not his woman.*

It was a long kiss, though how long Dany could not have said. When it ended, Ser Jorah let go of her, and she took a quick step backward. "You . . . you should not have . . ."

"I should not have waited so long," he finished for her. "I should have kissed you in Qarth, in Vaes Tolorro. I should have kissed you in the red waste, every night and every day. You were made to be kissed, often and well." His eyes were on her breasts.

Dany covered them with her hands, before her nipples could betray her. "I . . . that was not fitting. I am your queen."

"My queen," he said, "and the bravest, sweetest, and most beautiful woman I have ever seen. Daenerys—"

"Your Grace!"

"Your Grace," he conceded, *"the dragon has three heads* . . . remember? You have wondered at that, ever since you heard it from the warlocks in the House of Dust. Well, here's your meaning: Balerion, Meraxes, and Vhagar, ridden by Aegon, Rhaenys, and Visenya. The three-headed dragon of House Targaryen—three dragons, and *three riders.*"

"Yes," said Dany, "but my brothers are dead."

"Rhaenys and Visenya were Aegon's wives as well as his sisters. You have no brothers, but you can take husbands. And I tell you truly, Daenerys, there is no man in all the world who will ever be half so true to you as me."

UNSULLIED IN ASTAPOR

In the center of the Plaza of Pride stood a red brick fountain whose waters smelled of brimstone, and in the center of the fountain a monstrous harpy made of hammered bronze. Twenty feet tall she reared. She had a woman's face, with gilded hair, ivory eyes, and pointed ivory teeth. Water gushed yellow from her heavy breasts. But in place of arms she had the wings of a bat or a dragon, her legs were the legs of an eagle, and behind she wore a scorpion's curled and venomous tail.

The harpy of Ghis, Dany thought. Old Ghis had fallen five thousand years ago, if she remembered true; its legions shattered by the might of young Valyria, its mighty brick walls pulled down, its streets and buildings turned to ash and cinder by dragonflame, its very fields sown with salt, sulfur, and skulls. The gods of Ghis were dead, and so too its people; these Astapori were mongrels, Ser Jorah said. Even the Ghiscari tongue was largely forgotten; the slave cities spoke the High Valyrian of their conquerors, or what they had made of it.

Yet the symbol of the Old Empire still endured here, though this bronze monster had a heavy chain dangling from her talons, an open manacle at either end. *The harpy of Ghis had a thunderbolt in her claws. This is the harpy of Astapor.*

"Tell the Westerosi whore to lower her eyes," the slaver Kraznys mo Nakloz complained to the slave girl who spoke for him. "I deal in meat, not

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metal. The bronze is not for sale. Tell her to look at the soldiers. Even the dim purple eyes of a sunset savage can see how magnificent my creatures are, surely."

Kraznys's High Valyrian was twisted and thickened by the characteristic growl of Ghis, and flavored here and there with words of slaver argot. Dany understood him well enough, but she smiled and looked blankly at the slave girl, as if wondering what he might have said. "The Good Master Kraznys asks, are they not magnificent?" The girl spoke the Common Tongue well, for one who had never been there. No older than ten, she had the round flat face, dusky skin, and golden eyes of Naath. *The Peaceful People,* her folk were called. All agreed that they made the best slaves.

"They might be adequate to my needs," Dany answered. It had been Ser Jorah's suggestion that she speak only Dothraki and the Common Tongue while in Astapor. *My bear is more clever than he looks,* she reflected. "Tell me of their training."

"The Westerosi woman is pleased with them, but speaks no praise, to keep the price down," the translator told her master. "She wishes to know how they were trained."

Kraznys mo Nakloz bobbed his head. He smelled as if he'd bathed in raspberries, this slaver, and his jutting red-black beard glistened with oil. *He has larger breasts than I do,* Dany reflected. She could see them through the thin sea-green silk of the gold-fringed *tokar* he wound about his body and over one shoulder. His left hand held the *tokar* in place as he walked, while his right clasped a short leather whip. "Are all Westerosi pig ignorant?" he complained. "All the world knows that the Unsullied are masters of spear and shield and shortsword." He gave Dany a broad smile. "Tell her what she would know, slave, and be quick about it. The day is hot."

That much at least is no lie. A matched pair of slave girls stood in back of them, holding a striped silk awning over their heads, but even in the shade Dany felt a little light-headed, and Kraznys was perspiring freely. The Plaza of Pride had been baking in the sun since dawn. Even through the thickness of her sandals, she could feel the warmth of the red bricks underfoot. Waves of heat rose off them shimmering to make the stepped pyramids of Astapor around the plaza seem half a dream.

If the Unsullied felt the heat, however, they gave no hint of it. *They could be made of brick themselves, the way they stand there.* A thousand had been marched out of their barracks for her inspection; drawn up in ten ranks of one hundred before the fountain and its great bronze harpy, they stood stiffly at attention, their stony eyes fixed straight ahead. They wore naught but white linen clouts knotted about their loins, and conical bronze helms topped with a sharpened spike a foot tall. Kraznys had commanded them to lay down their spears and shields, and doff their swordbelts and quilted tunics, so the Queen of Westeros might better inspect the lean hardness of their bodies.

"They are chosen young, for size and speed and strength," the slave told her. "They begin their training at five. Every day they train from dawn to dusk, until they have mastered the short sword, the shield, and the three spears. The training is most rigorous, Your Grace. Only one boy in three survives it. This is well known. Among the Unsullied it is said that on the day they win their spiked cap, the worst is done with, for no duty that will ever fall to them could be as hard as their training."

Kraznys mo Nakloz supposedly spoke no word of the Common Tongue,

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but he bobbed his head as he listened, and from time to time gave the slave girl a poke with the end of his lash. "Tell her that these have been standing here for a day and a night, with no food nor water. Tell her that they will stand until they drop if I should command it, and when nine hundred and ninety-nine have collapsed to die upon the bricks, the last will stand there still, and never move until his own death claims him. Such is their courage. Tell her that."

"I call that madness, not courage," said Arstan Whitebeard, when the solemn little scribe was done. He tapped the end of his hardwood staff against the bricks, *tap tap,* as if to tell his displeasure. The old man had not wanted to sail to Astapor; nor did he favor buying this slave army. A queen should hear all sides before reaching a decision. That was why Dany had brought him with her to the Plaza of Pride, not to keep her safe. Her bloodriders would do that well enough. Ser Jorah Mormont she had left aboard *Balerion* to guard her people and her dragons. Much against her inclination, she had locked the dragons below decks. It was too dangerous to let them fly freely over the city; the world was all too full of men who would gladly kill them for no better reason than to name themselves *dragonslayer.*

"What did the smelly old man say?" the slaver demanded of his translator. When she told him, he smiled and said, "Inform the savages that we call this *obedience.* Others may be stronger or quicker or larger than the Unsullied. Some few may even equal their skill with sword and spear and shield. But nowhere between the seas will you ever find any more obedient."

"Sheep are obedient," said Arstan when the words had been translated. He had some Valyrian as well, though not so much as Dany, but like her he was feigning ignorance.

Kraznys mo Nakloz showed his big white teeth when that was rendered back to him. "A word from me and these sheep would spill his stinking old bowels on the bricks," he said, "but do not say that. Tell them that these creatures are more dogs than sheep. Do they eat dogs or horse in these Seven Kingdoms?"

"They prefer pigs and cows, your worship."

"Beef. Pfag. Food for unwashed savages."

Ignoring them all, Dany walked slowly down the line of slave soldiers. The girls followed close behind with the silk awning, to keep her in the shade, but the thousand men before her enjoyed no such protection. More than half had the copper skins and almond eyes of Dothraki and Lhazerene, but she saw men of the Free Cities in the ranks as well, along with pale Qartheen, ebon-faced Summer Islanders, and others whose origins she could not guess. And some had skins of the same amber hue as Kraznys mo Nakloz, and the bristly red-black hair that marked the ancient folk of Ghis, who named themselves the harpy's sons. *They sell even their own kind.* It should not have surprised her. The Dothraki did the same, when *khalasar* met *khalasar* in the sea of grass.

Some of the soldiers were tall and some were short. They ranged in age from fourteen to twenty, she judged. Their cheeks were smooth, and their eyes all the same, be they black or brown or blue or grey or amber. *They are like one man,* Dany thought, until she remembered that they were no men at all. The Unsullied were eunuchs, every one of them. "Why do you cut them?" she asked Kraznys through the slave girl. "Whole men are stronger than eunuchs, I have always heard."

"A eunuch who is cut young will never have the brute strength of one of

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your Westerosi knights, this is true," said Kraznys mo Nakloz when the question was put to him. "A bull is strong as well, but bulls die every day in the fighting pits. A girl of nine killed one not three days past in Jothiel's Pit. The Unsullied have something better than strength, tell her. They have discipline. We fight in the fashion of the Old Empire, yes. They are the lockstep legions of Old Ghis come again, absolutely obedient, absolutely loyal, and utterly without fear."

Dany listened patiently to the translation.

"Even the bravest men fear death and maiming," Arstan said when the girl was done.

Kraznys smiled again when he heard that. "Tell the old man that he smells of piss, and needs a stick to hold him up."

"Truly, your worship?"

He poked her with his lash. "Not, not truly, are you a girl or a goat, to ask such folly? Say that Unsullied are not men. Say that death means nothing to them, and maiming less than nothing." He stopped before a thickset man who had the look of Lhazar about him and brought his whip up sharply, laying a line of blood across one copper cheek. The eunuch blinked, and stood there, bleeding. "Would you like another?" asked Kraznys.

"If it please your worship."

It was hard to pretend not to understand. Dany laid a hand on Kraznys's arm before he could raise the whip again. "Tell the Good Master that I see how strong his Unsullied are, and how bravely they suffer pain."

Kraznys chuckled when he heard her words in Valyrian. "Tell this ignorant whore of a westerner that courage has nothing to do with it."

"The Good Master says that was not courage, Your Grace."

"Tell her to open those slut's eyes of hers."

"He begs you attend this carefully, Your Grace."

Kraznys moved to the next eunuch in line, a towering youth with the blue eyes and flaxen hair of Lys. "Your sword," he said. The eunuch knelt, unsheathed the blade, and offered it up hilt first. It was a short sword, made more for stabbing than for slashing, but the edge looked razor sharp. "Stand," Kraznys commanded.

"Your worship." The eunuch stood, and Kraznys mo Nakloz slid the sword slowly up his torso, leaving a thin red line across his belly and between his ribs. Then he jabbed the swordpoint in beneath a wide pink nipple and began to work it back and forth.

"What is he doing?" Dany demanded of the girl, as the blood ran down the man's chest.

"Tell the cow to stop her bleating," said Kraznys, without waiting for the translation. "This will do him no great harm. Men have no need of nipples, eunuchs even less so." The nipple hung by a thread of skin. He slashed, and sent it tumbling to the bricks, leaving behind a round red eye copiously weeping blood. The eunuch did not move, until Kraznys offered him back his sword, hilt first. "Here, I'm done with you."

"This one is pleased to have served you."

Kraznys turned back to Dany. "They feel no pain, you see."

"How can that be?" she demanded through the scribe.

"*The wine of courage,*" was the answer he gave her. "It is no true wine at all, but made from deadly nightshade, bloodfly larva, black lotus root, and many secret things. They drink it with every meal from the day they are cut, and with each passing year feel less and less. It makes them fearless in

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battle. Nor can they be tortured. Tell the savage her secrets are safe with the Unsullied. She may set them to guard her councils and even her bedchamber, and never a worry as to what they might overhear.

"In Yunkai and Meereen, eunuchs are often made by removing a boy's testicles, but leaving the penis. Such a creature is infertile, yet often still capable of erection. Only trouble can come of this. We remove the penis as well, leaving nothing. The Unsullied are the purest creatures on the earth." He gave Dany and Arstan another of his broad white smiles. "I have heard that in the Sunset Kingdoms men take solemn vows to keep chaste and father no children, but live only for their duty. Is it not so?"

"It is," Arstan said, when the question was put to him. "There are many such orders. The maesters of the Citadel, the septons and septas who serve the Seven, the silent sisters of the dead, the Kingsguard and the Night's Watch . . ."

"Poor things," growled the slaver, after the translation. "Men were not made to live such. Their days are a torment of temptation, any fool must see, and no doubt most succumb to their baser selves. Not so our Unsullied. They are wed to their swords in a way that your Sworn Brothers cannot hope to match. No woman can ever tempt them, nor any man."

His girl conveyed the essence of his speech, more politely. "There are other ways to tempt men, besides the flesh," Arstan Whitebeard objected, when she was done.

"Men, yes, but not Unsullied. Plunder interests them no more than rape. They own nothing but their weapons. We do not even permit them names."

"No names?" Dany frowned at the little scribe. "Can that be what the Good Master said? They have no names?"

"It is so, Your Grace."

Kraznys stopped in front of a Ghiscari who might have been his taller fitter brother, and flicked his lash at a small bronze disc on the swordbelt at his feet. "There is his name. Ask the whore of Westeros whether she can read Ghiscari glyphs." When Dany admitted that she could not, the slaver turned to the Unsullied. "What is your name?" he demanded.

"This one's name is Red Flea, your worship."

The girl repeated their exchange in the Common Tongue.

"And yesterday, what was it?"

"Black Rat, your worship."

"The day before?"

"Brown Flea, your worship."

"Before that?"

"This one does not recall, your worship. Blue Toad, perhaps. Or Blue Worm."

"Tell her all their names are such," Kraznys commanded the girl. "It reminds them that by themselves they are vermin. The name disks are thrown in an empty cask at duty's end, and each dawn plucked up again at random."

"More madness," said Arstan, when he heard. "How can any man possibly remember a new name every day?"

"Those who cannot are culled in training, along with those who cannot run all day in full pack, scale a mountain in the black of night, walk across a bed of coals, or slay an infant."

Dany's mouth surely twisted at that. *Did he see, or is he blind as well as cruel?* She turned away quickly, trying to keep her face a mask until she

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heard the translation. Only then did she allow herself to say, "Whose infants do they slay?"

"To win his spiked cap, an Unsullied must go to the slave marts with a silver mark, find some wailing newborn, and kill it before its mother's eyes. In this way, we make certain that there is no weakness left in them."

She was feeling faint. *The heat,* she tried to tell herself. "You take a babe from its mother's arms, kill it as she watches, and pay for her pain with a silver coin?"

When the translation was made for him, Kraznys mo Nakloz laughed aloud. "What a soft mewling fool this one is. Tell the whore of Westeros that the mark is for the child's owner, not the mother. The Unsullied are not permitted to steal." He tapped his whip against his leg. "Tell her that few ever fail that test. The dogs are harder for them, it must be said. We give each boy a puppy on the day that he is cut. At the end of the first year, he is required to strangle it. Any who cannot are killed, and fed to the surviving dogs. It makes for a good strong lesson, we find."

Arstan Whitebeard tapped the end of his staff on the bricks as he listened to that. *Tap tap tap.* Slow and steady. *Tap tap tap.* Dany saw him turn his eyes away, as if he could not bear to look at Kraznys any longer.

"The Good Master has said that these eunuchs cannot be tempted with coin or flesh," Dany told the girl, "but if some enemy of mine should offer them *freedom* for betraying me . . ."

"They would kill him out of hand and bring her his head, tell her that," the slaver answered. "Other slaves may steal and hoard up silver in hopes of buying freedom, but an Unsullied would not take it if the little mare offered it as a gift. They have no life outside their duty. They are *soldiers,* and that is all."

"It is soldiers I need," Dany admitted.

"Tell her it is well she came to Astapor, then. Ask her how large an army she wishes to buy?"

"How many Unsullied do you have to sell?"

"Eight thousand fully trained and available at present. We sell them only by the unit, she should know. By the thousand or the century. Once we sold by the ten, as household guards, but that proved unsound. Ten is too few. They mingle with other slaves, even freemen, and forget who and what they are." Kraznys waited for that to be rendered in the Common Tongue, and then continued. "This beggar queen must understand, such wonders do not come cheaply. In Yunkai and Meereen, slave swordsman can be had for less than the price of their swords, but Unsullied are the finest foot in all the world, and each represents many years of training. Tell her they are like Valyrian steel, folded over and over and hammered for years on end, until they are stronger and more resilient than any metal on earth."

"I know of Valyrian steel," said Dany. "Ask the Good Master if the Unsullied have their own officers."

"You must set your own officers over them. We train them to obey, not to think. If it is wits she wants, let her buy scribes."

"And their gear?"

"Sword, shield, spear, sandals, and quilted tunic are included," said Kraznys. "And the spiked caps, to be sure. They will wear such armor as you wish, but you must provide it."

Dany could think of no other questions. She looked at Arstan. "You have lived long in the world, Whitebeard. Now that you have seen them, what do you say?"

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"I say *no,* Your Grace," the old man answered at once.

"Why?" she asked. "Speak freely." Dany thought she knew what he would say, but she wanted the slave girl to hear, so Kraznys mo Nakloz might hear later.

"My queen," said Arstan, "there have been no slaves in the Seven Kingdoms for thousands of years. The old gods and the new alike hold slavery to be an abomination. Evil. If you should land in Westeros at the head of a slave army, many good men will oppose you for no other reason than that. You will do great harm to your cause, and to the honor of your House."

"Yet I must have some army," Dany said. "The boy Joffrey will not give me the Iron Throne for asking politely."

"When the day comes that you raise your banners, half of Westeros will be with you," Whitebeard promised. "Your brother Rhaegar is still remembered, with great love."

"And my father?" Dany said.

The old man hesitated before saying, "King Aerys is also remembered. He gave the realm many years of peace. Your Grace, you have no need of slaves. Magister Illyrio can keep you safe while your dragons grow, and send secret envoys across the narrow sea on your behalf, to sound out the high lords for your cause."

"Those same high lords who abandoned my father to the Kingslayer and bent the knee to Robert the Usurper?"

"Even those who bent their knees may yearn in their hearts for the return of the dragons."

"*May,*" said Dany. That was such a slippery word, *may.* In any language. She turned back to Kraznys mo Nakloz and his slave girl. "I must consider carefully."

The slaver shrugged. "Tell her to consider quickly. There are many other buyers. Only three days past I showed these same Unsullied to a corsair king who hopes to buy them all."

"The corsair wanted only a hundred, your worship," Dany heard the slave girl say.

He poked her with the end of the whip. "Corsairs are all liars. He'll buy them all. Tell her that, girl."

Dany knew she would take more than a hundred, if she took any at all. "Remind your Good Master of who I am. Remind him that I am Daenerys Stormborn, Mother of Dragons, the Unburnt, trueborn queen of the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros. My blood is the blood of Aegon the Conqueror, and of old Valyria before him."

Yet her words did not move the plump perfumed slaver, even when rendered in his own ugly tongue. "Old Ghis ruled an empire when the Valyrians were still fucking sheep," he growled at the poor little scribe, "and we are the sons of the harpy." He gave a shrug. "My tongue is wasted wagging at women. East or west, it makes no matter, they cannot decide until they have been pampered and flattered and stuffed with sweetmeats. Well, if this is my fate, so be it. Tell the whore that if she requires a guide to our sweet city, Kraznys mo Nakloz will gladly serve her . . . and service her as well, if she is more woman than she looks."

"Good Master Kraznys would be most pleased to show you Astapor while you ponder, Your Grace," the translator said.

"I will feed her jellied dog brains, and a fine rich stew of red octopus and unborn puppy." He wiped his lips.

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"Many delicious dishes can be had here, he says."

"Tell her how pretty the pyramids are at night," the slaver growled. "Tell her I will lick honey off her breasts, or allow her to lick honey off mine if she prefers."

"Astapor is most beautiful at dusk, Your Grace," said the slave girl. "The Good Masters light silk lanterns on every terrace, so all the pyramids glow with colored lights. Pleasure barges ply the Worm, playing soft music and calling at the little islands for food and wine and other delights."

"Ask her if she wishes to view our fighting pits," Kraznys added. "Douquor's Pit has a fine folly scheduled for the evening. A bear and three small boys. One boy will be rolled in honey, one in blood, and one in rotting fish, and she may wager on which the bear will eat first."

Tap tap tap, Dany heard. Arstan Whitebeard's face was still, but his staff beat out his rage. *Tap tap tap.* She made herself smile. "I have my own bear on *Balerion,*" she told the translator, "and he may well eat me if I do not return to him."

"See," said Kraznys when her words were translated. "It is not the woman who decides, it is this man she runs to. As ever!"

"Thank the Good Master for his patient kindness," Dany said, "and tell him that I will think on all I learned here." She gave her arm to Arstan Whitebeard, to lead her back across the plaza to her litter. Aggo and Jhogo fell in to either side of them, walking with the bowlegged swagger all the horselords affected when forced to dismount and stride the earth like common mortals.

Dany climbed into her litter frowning, and beckoned Arstan to climb in beside her. A man as old as him should not be walking in such heat. She did not close the curtains as they got underway. With the sun beating down so fiercely on this city of red brick, every stray breeze was to be cherished, even if it did come with a swirl of fine red dust. *Besides, I need to see.*

Astapor was a queer city, even to the eyes of one who had walked within the House of Dust and bathed in the Womb of the World beneath the Mother of Mountains. All the streets were made of the same red brick that had paved the plaza. So too were the stepped pyramids, the deep-dug fighting pits with their rings of descending seats, the sulfurous fountains and gloomy wine caves, and the ancient walls that encircled them. *So many bricks,* she thought, *and so old and crumbling.* Their fine red dust was everywhere, dancing down the gutters at each gust of wind. Small wonder so many Astapori women veiled their faces; the brick dust stung the eyes worse than sand.

"Make way!" Jhogo shouted as he rode before her litter. "Make way for the Mother of Dragons!" But when he uncoiled the great silver-handled whip that Dany had given him, and made to crack it in the air, she leaned out and told him nay. "Not in this place, blood of my blood," she told him, in his own tongue. "These bricks have heard too much of the sound of whips."

The streets had been largely deserted when they had set out from the port that morning, and scarcely seemed more crowded now. An elephant lumbered past with a latticework litter on its back. A naked boy with peeling skin sat in a dry brick gutter, picking his nose and staring sullenly at some ants in the street. He lifted his head at the sound of hooves, and gaped as a column of mounted guards trotted by in a cloud of red dust and brittle laughter. The copper discs sewn to their cloaks of yellow silk glittered like so many suns, but their tunics were embroidered linen, and below the waist

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they wore sandals and pleated linen skirts. Bareheaded, each man had teased and oiled and twisted his stiff red-black hair into fantastic shapes, horns and wings and blades and even grasping hands, so they looked like some troupe of demons escaped from the seventh hell. The naked boy watched them for a bit, along with Dany, but soon enough they were gone, and he went back to his ants, and a knuckle up his nose.

An old city, this, she reflected, *but not so populous as it was in its glory, nor near so crowded as Qarth or Pentos or Lys.*

Her litter came to a sudden halt at the cross street, to allow a coffle of slaves to shuffle across her path, urged along by the crack of an overseer's lash. These were no Unsullied, Dany noted, but a more common sort of men, with pale brown skins and black hair. There were women among them, but no children. All were naked. Two Astapori rode behind them on white asses, a man in a red silk *tokar* and a veiled woman in sheer blue linen decorated with flakes of lapis lazuli. In her red-black hair she wore an ivory comb. The man laughed as he whispered to her, paying no more mind to Dany than to his slaves, nor the overseer with his twisted five-thonged lash, a squat broad Dothraki who had the harpy and chains tattooed proudly across his muscular chest.

"Bricks and blood built Astapor," Whitebeard murmured at her side, "and bricks and blood her people."

"What is that?" Dany asked him, curious.

"An old rhyme a maester taught me, when I was a boy. I never knew how true it was. The bricks of Astapor are red with the blood of the slaves who make them."

"I can well believe that," said Dany.

"Then leave this place before your heart turns to brick as well. Sail this very night, on the evening tide."

Would that I could, thought Dany. "When I leave Astapor it must be with an army, Ser Jorah says."

"Ser Jorah was a slaver himself, Your Grace," the old man reminded her. "Hire sellswords to be your army, I beg of you. A man who fights for coin has no honor, but at least they are no slaves. Buy your army in Pentos, Braavos, or Myr."

"My brother visited near all the Free Cities. The magisters and archons fed him wine and promises, but his soul was starved to death. A man cannot sup from the beggar's bowl all his life and stay a man. I had my taste in Qarth, that was enough. I will not come to Pentos bowl in hand."

"Better to come a beggar than a slaver," Arstan said.

"There speaks one who has been neither." Dany's nostrils flared. "Do you know what it is like to be *sold,* squire? I do. My brother sold me to Khal Drogo for the promise of a golden crown. Well, Drogo crowned him in gold, though not as he had wished, and I . . . my sun-and-stars made a queen of me, but if he had been a different man, it might have been much otherwise. Do you think I have forgotten how it felt to be afraid?"

Whitebeard bowed his head. "Your Grace," he said, "I did not mean to give offense."

"Only lies offend me, never honest counsel." Dany patted Arstan's spotted hand to reassure him. "I have a dragon's temper, that's all. You must not let it frighten you."

"I shall try and remember," Whitebeard said, with a smile.

He has a good face, and great strength to him, Dany thought. She could

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not understand why Ser Jorah mistrusted the old man so. *Could he be jealous that I have found another man to talk to?* Unbidden, her thoughts went back to the night on *Balerion* when the exile knight had kissed her. *He should never have done that. He is thrice my age, and of too low a birth for me, and I never gave him leave. No true knight would ever kiss a queen without her leave.* She had taken care never to be alone with Ser Jorah after that, keeping her handmaids Irri and Jhiqui with her aboard ship, and sometimes her bloodriders as well. *He wants to kiss me again, I can see it in his eyes.*

What Dany wanted she could not begin to say, but Jorah's kiss had woken something in her, something that been sleeping since Drogo died, who had been her sun-and-stars. Lying abed in her narrow bunk, she found herself wondering how it would be to have a man squeezed in beside her in place of her handmaid, and the thought was more exciting than it should have been. Sometimes she would close her eyes and dream of him, but it was never Jorah Mormont she dreamed of; her lover was always younger and more comely, though his face remained a shifting shadow.

Once, so tormented she could not sleep, Dany slid a hand down between her legs, and gasped when she felt how wet she was. Scarce daring to breath, she moved her fingers back and forth between her lower lips, slowly so as not to wake Irri beside her, until she found one sweet spot and lingered there, touching herself lightly, timidly at first and then faster, but still the relief she wanted seemed to recede before her. Only then her dragons stirred, and one of them screamed out across the cabin, and Irri woke and saw what she was doing.

Dany knew her face was flushed, but in the darkness Irri surely could not tell. Wordless, the handmaid put a hand on her breast, then bent to take a nipple in her mouth. Her other hand drifted down across the soft curve of belly, through the mound of fine silvery-gold hair, and went to work between Dany's thighs. It was no more than a few moments until her legs twisted and her breasts heaved and her whole body shuddered. She screamed then, or perhaps that was Drogon. Irri never said a thing, only curled back up and went back to sleep the instant the thing was done.

The next day, it all seemed a dream. And what did Ser Jorah have to do with it, if anything? *It is Drogo I want, my sun-and-stars,* Dany reminded herself. *Not Irri, and not Ser Jorah, only Drogo.* Drogo was dead, though. She'd thought these feelings had died with him there in the red waste, but one treacherous kiss had somehow brought them back to life. *He should never have kissed me. He presumed too much, and I permitted it. It must never happen again.* She set her mouth grimly and gave her head a shake, and the bell in her braid chimed softly.

Closer to the bay, the city presented a fairer face. The great brick pyramids lined the shore, the largest four hundred feet high. All manner of trees and vines and flowers grew on their broad terraces, and the winds that swirled around them smelled green and fragrant. Another gigantic harpy stood atop the gate, this one made of baked red clay and crumbling visibly, with no more than a stub of her scorpion's tail remaining. The chain she grasped in her clay claws was old iron, rotten with rust. It was cooler down by the water, though. The lapping of the waves against the rotting pilings made a curiously soothing sound.

Aggo helped Dany down from her litter. Strong Belwas was seated on a massive piling, eating a great haunch of brown roasted meat. "Dog," he said

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happily when he saw Dany. "Good dog in Astapor, little queen. Eat?" He offered it with a greasy grin.

"That is kind of you, Belwas, but no." Dany had eaten dog in other places, at other times, but just now all she could think of was the Unsullied and their stupid puppies. She swept past the huge eunuch and up the plank onto the deck of *Balerion.*

Ser Jorah Mormont stood waiting for her. "Your Grace," he said, bowing his head. "The slavers have come and gone. Three of them, with a dozen scribes and as many slaves to lift and fetch. They crawled over every foot of our holds and made note of all we had." He walked her aft. "How many men do they have for sale?"

"None." Was it Mormont she was angry with, or this city with its sullen heat, its stinks and sweats and crumbling bricks? "They sell eunuchs, not men. Eunuchs made of brick, like the rest of Astapor. Shall I buy eight thousand brick eunuchs with dead eyes that never move, who kill suckling babes for the sake of a spiked hat and strangle their own dogs? They don't even have names. So don't call them *men,* ser."

"*Khaleesi,*" he said, taken aback by her fury, "the Unsullied are chosen as boys, and trained—"

"I have heard all I care to of their *training.*" Dany could feel tears welling in her eyes, sudden and unwanted. Her hand flashed up, and cracked Ser Jorah hard across the face. It was either that, or cry.

Mormont touched the cheek she'd slapped. "If I have displeased my queen—"

"You *have.* You've displeased me greatly, ser. If you were my true knight, you would never have brought me to this vile sty." *If you were my true knight, you would never have kissed me, or looked at my breasts the way you did, or . . .*

"As Your Grace commands. I shall tell Captain Groleo to make ready to sail on the evening tide, for some sty less vile."

"No." Groleo watched them from the forecastle, and his crew was watching too. Whitebeard, her bloodriders, Jhiqui, everyone had stopped what they were doing at the sound of the slap. "I want to sail *now,* not on the tide, I want to sail far and fast and never look back. But I can't, can I? There are eight thousand brick eunuchs for sale, and I must find some way to buy them." And with that she left him, and went below.

Behind the carved wooden door of the captain's cabin, her dragons were restless. Drogon raised his head and screamed, pale smoke venting from his nostrils, and Viserion flapped at her and tried to perch on her shoulder, as he had when he was smaller. "No," Dany said, trying to shrug him off gently. "You're too big for that now, sweetling." But the dragon coiled his white and gold tail around one arm and dug black claws into the fabric of her sleeve, clinging tightly. Helpless, she sank into Groleo's great leather chair, giggling.

"They have been wild while you were gone, *Khaleesi,*" Irri told her. "Viserion clawed splinters from the door, do you see? And Drogon made to escape when the slaver men came to see them. When I grabbed his tail to hold him back, he turned and bit me." She showed Dany the marks of his teeth on her hand.

"Did any of them try to burn their way free?" That was the thing that frightened Dany the most.

"No, *Khaleesi.* Drogon breathed his fire, but in the empty air. The slaver men feared to come near him."

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She kissed Irri's hand where Drogon had bitten it. "I'm sorry he hurt you. Dragons are not meant to be locked up in a small ship's cabin."

"Dragons are like horses in this," Irri said. "And riders, too. The horses scream below, *Khaleesi,* and kick at the wooden walls. I hear them. And Jhiqui says the old women and the little ones scream too, when you are not here. They do not like this water cart. They do not like the black salt sea."

"I know," Dany said. "I do, I know."

"My *khaleesi* is sad?"

"Yes," Dany admitted. *Sad and lost.*

"Should I pleasure the *khaleesi?*"

Dany stepped away from her. "No. Irri, you do not need to do that. What happened that night, when you woke . . . you're no bed slave, I freed you, remember? You . . ."

"I am handmaid to the Mother of Dragons," the girl said. "It is great honor to please my *khaleesi.*"

"I don't want that," she insisted. "I don't." She turned away sharply. "Leave me now. I want to be alone. To think."

Dusk had begun to settle over the waters of Slaver's Bay before Dany returned to deck. She stood by the rail and looked out over Astapor. *From here it looks almost beautiful,* she thought. The stars were coming out above, and the silk lanterns below, just as Kraznys's translator had promised. The brick pyramids were all glimmery with light. *But it is dark below, in the streets and plazas and fighting pits. And it is darkest of all in the barracks, where some little boy is feeding scraps to the puppy they gave him when they took away his manhood.*

There was a soft step behind her. "*Khaleesi.*" His voice. "Might I speak frankly?"

Dany did not turn. She could not bear to look at him just now. If she did, she might well slap him again. Or cry. Or kiss him. And never know which was right and which was wrong and which was madness. "Say what you will, ser."

"When Aegon the Dragon stepped ashore in Westeros, the kings of Vale and Rock and Reach did not rush to hand him their crowns. If you mean to sit his Iron Throne, you must win it as he did, with steel and dragonfire. And that will mean blood on your hands before the thing is done."

Blood and fire, thought Dany. The words of House Targaryen. She had known them all her life. "The blood of my enemies I will shed gladly. The blood of innocents is another matter. Eight thousand Unsullied they would offer me. Eight thousand dead babes. Eight thousand strangled dogs."

"Your Grace," said Jorah Mormont, "I saw King's Landing after the Sack. Babes were butchered that day as well, and old men, and children at play. More women were raped than you can count. There is a savage beast in every man, and when you hand that man a sword or spear and send him forth to war, the beast stirs. The scent of blood is all it takes to wake him. Yet I have never heard of these Unsullied raping, nor putting a city to the sword, nor even plundering, save at the express command of those who lead them. Brick they may be, as you say, but if you buy them henceforth the only dogs they'll kill are those *you* want dead. And you do have some dogs you want dead, as I recall."

The Usurper's dogs. "Yes." Dany gazed off at the soft colored lights and let the cool salt breeze caress her. "You speak of sacking cities. Answer me this, ser—why have the Dothraki never sacked *this* city?" She pointed. "Look at

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the walls. You can see where they've begun to crumble. There, and there. Do you see any guards on those towers? I don't. Are they hiding, ser? I saw these sons of the harpy today, all their proud highborn warriors. They dressed in linen skirts, and the fiercest thing about them was their hair. Even a modest *khalasar* could crack this Astapor like a nut and spill out the rotted meat inside. So tell me, why is that ugly harpy not sitting beside the godsway in Vaes Dothrak among the other stolen gods?"

"You have a dragon's eye, *Khaleesi,* that's plain to see."

"I wanted an answer, not a compliment."

"There are two reasons. Astapor's brave defenders are so much chaff, it's true. Old names and fat purses who dress up as Ghiscari scourges to pretend they still rule a vast empire. Every one is a high officer. On feastdays they fight mock wars in the pits to demonstrate what brilliant commanders they are, but it's the eunuchs who do the dying. All the same, any enemy wanting to sack Astapor would have to know that they'd be facing Unsullied. The slavers would turn out the whole garrison in the city's defense. The Dothraki have not ridden against Unsullied since they left their braids at the gates of Qohor."

"And the second reason?" Dany asked.

"Who would attack Astapor?" Ser Jorah asked. "Meereen and Yunkai are rivals but not enemies, the Doom destroyed Valyria, the folk of the eastern hinterlands are all Ghiscari, and beyond the hills lies Lhazar. The Lamb Men, as your Dothraki call them, a notably unwarlike people."

"Yes," she agreed, "but *north* of the slave cities is the Dothraki Sea, and two dozen mighty khals who like nothing more than sacking cities and carrying off their people into slavery."

"Carrying them off *where*? What good are slaves once you've killed the slavers? Valyria is no more, Qarth lies beyond the red waste, and the Nine Free Cities are thousands of leagues to the west. And you may be sure the sons of the harpy give lavishly to every passing khal, just as the magisters do in Pentos and Norvos and Myr. They know that if they feast the horselords and give them gifts, they will soon ride on. It's cheaper than fighting, and a deal more certain."

Cheaper than fighting. If only it could be that easy for her. How pleasant it would be to sail to King's Landing with her dragons, and pay the boy Joffrey a chest of gold to make him go away. "*Khaleesi?*" Ser Jorah prompted, when she had been silent for a long time. He touched her elbow lightly.

Dany shrugged him off. "Viserys would have bought as many Unsullied as he had the coin for. But you once said I was like Rhaegar. . . ."

"I remember, Daenerys."

"*Your Grace,*" she corrected. "Prince Rhaegar led free men into battle, not slaves. Whitebeard said he dubbed his squires himself, and made many other knights as well."

"There was no higher honor than to receive your knighthood from the Prince of Dragonstone."

"Tell me, then—when he touched a man on the shoulder with his sword, what did he say? 'Go forth and kill the weak?' Or go forth and defend them? At the Trident, those brave men Viserys spoke of who died beneath our dragon banners—did they give their lives because they *believed* in Rhaegar's cause, or because they had been bought and paid for?" Dany turned to Mormont, crossed her arms, and waited for an answer.

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"My queen," the big man said slowly, "all you say is true. But Rhaegar lost on the Trident. He lost the battle, he lost the war, he lost the kingdom, and he lost his life. His blood swirled downriver with the rubies from his breastplate, and Robert the Usurper rode over his corpse to steal the Iron Throne. Rhaegar fought valiantly, Rhaegar fought nobly, Rhaegar fought honorably. And Rhaegar *died*."

TRADING IN DRAGONS

"*All?*" The slave girl sounded wary. "Your Grace, did this one's worthless ears mishear you?"

Cool green light filtered down through the diamond-shaped panes of the thick windows of colored glass set in the sloping triangular walls, and a breeze was blowing gently through the open terrace doors, carrying the scents of fruit and flowers from the garden beyond. "Your ears heard true," said Dany. "I want to buy them all. Tell the Good Masters, if you will."

She had chosen a Qartheen gown today. The deep violet silk brought out the purple of her eyes. The cut of it bared her left breast. While the Good Masters of Astapor conferred among themselves in low voices, Dany sipped tart persimmon wine from a tall siver flute. She could not quite make out all that they were saying, but she could hear the greed.

Each of the eight brokers was attended by two or three body slaves . . . though one Grazdan, the eldest, had six. So as not to seem a beggar, Dany had brought her own attendants; Irri and Jhiqui in their sandsilk trousers and painted vests, old Whitebeard and mighty Belwas, her bloodriders. Ser Jorah stood behind her sweltering in his green surcoat with the black bear of Mormont embroidered upon it. The smell of his sweat was an earthy answer to the sweet perfumes that drenched the Astapori.

"All," growled Kraznys mo Nakloz, who smelled of peaches today. The slave girl repeated the word in the Common Tongue of Westeros. "Of thousands, there are eight. Is this what she means by *all?* There are also six centuries, who shall be part of a ninth thousand when complete. Would she have them too?"

"I would," said Dany when the question was put to her. "The eight thousands, the six centuries . . . and the ones still in training as well. The one who have not earned the spikes."

Kraznys turned back to his fellows. Once again they conferred among themselves. The translator had told Dany their names, but it was hard to keep them straight. Four of the men seemed to be named Grazdan, presumably after Grazdan the Great who had founded Old Ghis in the dawn of days. They all looked alike; thick fleshy men with amber skin, broad noses, dark eyes. Their wiry hair was black, or a dark red, or that queer mixture of red and black that was peculiar to Ghiscari. All wrapped themselves in *tokars,* a garment permitted only to freeborn men of Astapor.

It was the fringe on the *tokar* that proclaimed a man's status, Dany had been told by Captain Groleo. In this cool green room atop the pyramid, two of the slavers wore *tokars* fringed in silver, five had gold fringes, and one, the oldest Grazdan, displayed a fringe of fat white pearls that clacked together softly when he shifted in his seat or moved an arm.

"We cannot sell half-trained boys," one of the silver fringe Grazdans was saying to the others.

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"We can, if her gold is good," said a fatter man whose fringe was gold.

"They are not Unsullied. They have not killed their sucklings. If they fail in the field, they will shame us. And even if we cut five thousand raw boys tomorrow, it would be be ten years before they are fit for sale. What would we tell the next buyer who comes seeking Unsullied?"

"We will tell him that he must wait," said the fat man. "Gold in my purse is better than gold in my future."

Dany let them argue, sipping the tart persimmon wine and trying to keep her face blank and ignorant. *I will have them all, no matter the price,* she told herself. The city had a hundred slave traders, but the eight before her were the greatest. When selling bed slaves, fieldhands, scribes, craftsmen, and tutors, these men were rivals, but their ancestors had allied one with the other for the purpose of making and selling the Unsullied. *Brick and blood built Astapor, and brick and blood her people.*

It was Kraznys who finally announced their decision. "Tell her that the eight thousands you shall have, if her gold prove sufficient. And the six centuries, if she wishes. Tell her to come back in a year, and we will sell her another two thousand."

"In a year, I shall be in Westeros," said Dany when she had heard the translation. "My need is *now.* The Unsullied are well-trained, but even so, many will fall in battle. I shall need the boys as replacements to take up the swords they drop." She put her wine aside and leaned toward the slave girl. "Tell the Good Masters that I will want even the little ones who still have their puppies. Tell them that I will pay as much for the boy they cut yesterday as for an Unsullied in a spiked helm."

The girl told them. The answer was still no.

Dany frowned in annoyance. "Very well. Tell them I will pay double, so long as I get them all."

"Double?" The fat one in the gold fringe all but drooled.

"This little whore is a fool, truly," said Kraznys mo Nakloz. "Ask her for triple, I say. She is desperate enough to pay. Ask for ten times the price of every slave, yes."

The tall Grazdan with the spiked beard spoke in the Common Tongue, though not so well as the slave girl. "Your Grace," he growled, "Westeros is being wealthy, yes, but you are not being queen now. Perhaps will never being queen. Even Unsullied may be losing battles to savage steel knights of Seven Kingdoms. I am reminding, the Good Masters of Astapor are not selling flesh for promisings. Are you having gold and trading goods sufficient to be paying for all these eunuchs you are wanting?"

"You know the answer to that better than I, Good Master," Dany replied. "Your men have gone through my ships and tallied every bead of amber and jar of saffron. How much do I have?"

"Sufficient to be buying one of thousands," the Good Master said, with a contemptuous smile. "Yet you are paying double, you are saying. Five centuries, then, is all you buy."

"Your pretty crown might buy another century," said the fat one in Valyrian. "Your crown of the three dragons."

Dany waited for his words to be translated. "My crown is not for sale." When Viserys sold their mother's crown, the last joy had gone from him, leaving only rage. "Nor will I enslave my people, nor sell their goods and horses. But my ships you can have. The great cog *Balarion* and the galleys *Vhagar* and *Meraxes.*" She had warned Groleo and the other captains it

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might come to this, though they had protested the necessity of it furiously. "Three good ships should be worth more than a few paltry eunuchs."

The fat Grazdan turned to the others. They conferred in low voices once again. "Two of the thousands," the one with the spiked beard said when he turned back. "It is too much, but the Good Masters are being generous and your need is being great."

Two thousand would never serve for what she meant to do. *I must have them all.* Dany knew what she must do now, though the taste of it was so bitter that even the persimmon wine could not cleanse it from her month. She had considered long and hard last night, and found no other way. *It is my only choice.* "Give me all," she said, "and you may have a dragon."

There was the sound of indrawn breath from Jhiqui beside her. Kraznys smiled at his fellows. "Did I not tell you? Anything, she would give us."

Whitebeard stared in shocked disbelief. His thin, spotted hand trembled where it grasped the staff. "No." He went to one knee before her. "Your Grace, I beg you, win your throne with dragons, not slaves. You must not do this thing—"

"*You* must not presume to instruct me. Ser Jorah, remove Whitebeard from my presence."

Mormont seized the old man roughly by an elbow, yanked him back to his feet, and marched him out onto the terrace.

"Tell the Good Masters I regret this interruption," said Dany to the slave girl. "Tell them I await their answer."

She knew the answer, though; she could see it in the glitter of their eyes and the smiles they tried so hard to hide. Astapor had thousands of eunuchs, and even more slave boys waiting to be cut, but there were only three living dragons in all the great wide world. *And the Ghiscari lust for dragons.* How could they not? Five times had Old Ghis contended with Valyria when the world was young, and five times gone down to bleak defeat. For the Freehold had dragons, and the Empire had none.

The oldest Grazdan stirred in his seat, and his pearls clacked together softly. "A dragon of our choice," he said in a thin, hard voice. "The black one is largest and healthiest."

"His name is Drogon." She nodded.

"All your goods, save your crown and your queenly raiment, which we will allow you to keep. The three ships. And Drogon."

"Done," she said, in the Common Tongue.

"Done," the old Grazdan answered in his thick Valyrian. The others echoed that old man of the pearl fringe. "Done," the slave girl translated, "and done, and done, eight times done."

"The Unsullied will learn your savage tongue quick enough," added Kraznys mo Nakloz, when all the arrangements had been made, "but until such time you will need a slave to speak to them. Take this one as our gift to you, a token of a bargain well struck."

"I shall," said Dany.

The slave girl rendered his words to her, and hers to him. If she had feelings about being given for a token, she took care not to let them show.

Arstan Whitebeard held his tongue as well, when Dany swept by him on the terrace. He followed her down the steps in silence, but she could hear his hardwood staff *tap tapping* on the red bricks as they went. She did not blame him for his fury. It was a wretched thing she did. *The Mother of Dragons has sold her strongest child.* Even the thought made her ill.

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Yet down in the Plaza of Pride, standing on the hot red bricks between the slavers' pyramid and the barracks of the eunuchs, Dany turned on the old man. "Whitebeard," she said, "I want your counsel, and you should never fear to speak your mind with me . . . when we are alone. But *never* question me in front of strangers. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Your Grace," he said unhappily.

"I am not a child," she told him. "I am a queen."

"Yet even queens can err. The Astapori have cheated you, Your Grace. A dragon is worth more than any army. Aegon proved that three hundred years ago, upon the Field of Fire."

"I know what Aegon proved. I mean to prove a few things of my own." Dany turned away from him, to the slave girl standing meekly beside her litter. "Do you have a name, or must you draw a new one every day from some barrel?"

"That is only for Unsullied," the girl said. Then she realized the question had been asked in High Valyrian. Her eyes went wide. "Oh."

"Your name is Oh?"

"No. Your Grace, forgive this one her outburst. Your slave's name is Missandei, but . . ."

"Missandei is no longer a slave. I free you, from this instant. Come ride with me in the litter, I wish to talk." Rakharo helped them in, and Dany drew the curtains shut against the dust and heat. "If you stay with me you will serve as one of my handmaids," she said as they set off. "I shall keep you by my side to speak for me as you spoke for Kraznys. But you may leave my service whenever you choose, if you have father or mother you would sooner return to."

"This one will stay," the girl said. "This one . . . I . . . there is no place for me to go. This . . . I will serve you, gladly."

"I can give you freedom, but not safety," Dany warned. "I have a world to cross and wars to fight. You may go hungry. You may grow sick. You may be killed."

"*Valar morghulis*," said Missandei, in High Valyrian.

"All men must die," Dany agreed, "but not for a long while, we may pray." She leaned back on the pillows and took the girl's hand. "Are these Unsullied truly fearless?"

"Yes, Your Grace."

"You serve me now. Is it true they feel no pain?"

"The wine of courage kills such feelings. By the time they slay their sucklings, they have been drinking it for years."

"And they are obedient?"

"Obedience is all they know. If you told them not to breathe, they would find that easier than not to obey."

Dany nodded. "And when I am done with them?"

"Your Grace?"

"When I have won my war and claimed the throne that was my father's, my knights will sheath their swords and return to their keeps, to their wives and children and mothers . . . to their *lives*. But these eunuchs have no lives. What am I to do with eight thousand eunuchs when there are no more battles to be fought?"

"The Unsullied make fine guards and excellent watchmen, Your Grace," said Missandei. "And it is never hard to find a buyer for such fine well-blooded troops."

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"Men are not bought and sold in Westeros, they tell me."

"With all respect, Your Grace, Unsullied are not men."

"If I did resell them, how would I know they could not be used against me?" Dany asked pointedly. "Would they do that? Fight *against* me, even do me harm?"

"If their master commanded. They do not question, Your Grace. All the questions have been culled from them. They obey." She looked troubled. "When you are . . . when you are done with them . . . Your Grace might command them to fall upon their swords."

"And even that, they would do?"

"Yes." Missandei's voice had grown soft. "Your Grace."

Dany squeezed her hand. "You would sooner I did not ask it of them, though. Why is that? Why do you care?"

"This one does not . . . I . . . Your Grace . . ."

"Tell me."

The girl lowered her eyes. "Three of them were my brothers once, Your Grace."

Then I hope your brothers are as brave and clever as you. Dany leaned back into her pillow, and let the litter bear her onward, back to *Balerion* one last time to set her world in order. *And back to Drogon.* Her mouth set grimly.

It was a long, dark, windy night that followed. Dany fed her dragons as she always did, but found she had no appetite herself. She cried a while, alone in her cabin, then dried her tears long enough for yet another argument with Groleo. "Magister Illyrio is not here," she finally had to tell him, "and if he was, he could not sway me either. I need the Unsullied more than I need these ships, and I will hear no more about it."

The anger burned the grief and fear from her, for a few hours at the least. Afterward she called her bloodriders to her cabin, with Ser Jorah. They were the only ones she truly trusted.

She meant to sleep afterward, to be well rested for the morrow, but an hour of restless tossing in the stuffy confines of the cabin soon convinced her that was hopeless. Outside her door she found Aggo fitting a new string to his bow by the light of a swinging oil lamp. Rakharo sat crosslegged on the deck beside him, sharpening his *arakh* with a whetstone. Dany told them both to keep on with what they were doing, and went up on deck for a taste of the cool night air. The crew left her alone as they went about their business, but Ser Jorah soon joined her by the rail. *He is never far*, Dany thought. *He knows my moods too well.*

"*Khaleesi.* You ought to be asleep. Tomorrow will be hot and hard, I promise you. You'll need your strength."

"Do you remember Eroeh?" she asked him.

"The Lhazareen girl?"

"They were raping her, but I stopped them and took her under my protection. Only when my sun-and-stars was dead Mago took her back, used her again, and killed her. Aggo said it was her fate."

"I remember," Ser Jorah said.

"I was alone for a long time, Jorah. All alone but for my brother. I was such a small scared thing. Viserys should have protected me, but instead he hurt me and scared me worse. He shouldn't have done that. He wasn't just my brother, he was my *king*. Why do the gods make kings and queens, if not to protect the ones who can't protect themselves?"

"Some kings make themselves. Robert did."

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"He was no true king," Dany said scornfully. "He did no justice. Justice . . . that's what kings are *for.*"

Ser Jorah had no answer. He only smiled, and touched her hair, so lightly. It was enough.

That night she dreamt that she was Rhaegar, riding to the Trident. But she was mounted on a dragon, not a horse. When she saw the Usurper's rebel host across the river they were armored all in ice, but she bathed them in dragonfire and they melted away like dew and turned the Trident into a torrent. Some small part of her knew that she was dreaming, but another part exulted. *This is how it was meant to be. The other was a nightmare, and I have only now awakened.*

If I look back I am lost, Dany told herself the next morning as she entered Astapor through the harbor gates. She dared not remind herself how small and insignificant her following truly was, or she would lose all courage. Today she rode her silver, clad in horsehair pants and painted leather vest, a bronze medallion belt about her waist and two more crossed between her breasts. Irri and Jhiqui had braided her hair and hung it with a tiny silver bell whose chime sang of the Undying of Qarth, burned in their Palace of Dust.

The red brick streets of Astapor were almost crowded this morning. Slaves and servants lined the ways, while the slavers and their women donned their *tokars* to look down from their stepped pyramids. *They are not so different from Qartheen after all,* she thought. *They want a glimpse of dragons to tell their children of, and their children's children.* It made her wonder how many of them would ever have children.

Aggo went before her with his great Dothraki bow. Strong Belwas walked to the right of her mare, the girl Missandei to her left. Ser Jorah Mormont was behind in mail and surcoat, glowering at anyone who came too near. Rakharo and Jhogo protected the litter. Dany had commanded that the top be removed, so her three dragons might be chained to the platform. Irri and Jhiqui rode with them, to try and keep them calm. Yet Viserion's tail lashed back and forth, and smoke rose angry from his nostrils. Rhaegal could sense something wrong as well. Thrice he tried to take wing, only to be pulled down by the heavy chain in Jhiqui's hand. Drogon only coiled into a ball, wings and tail tucked tight. Only the red glow of his eyes remained to tell that he was not asleep.

The rest of her people followed; Groleo and the other captains and their crews, and the eighty-three Dothraki who remained to her of the hundred thousand who had once ridden in Drogo's *khalasar.* She put the oldest and weakest on the inside of the column, with nursing women and those with child, and the little girls, and the boys too young to braid their hair. The rest—her warriors, such as they were—rode outrider and moved their dismal herd along, the hundred-odd gaunt horses who had survived both red waste and black salt sea.

I ought to have a banner sewn, she thought as she led her tattered band up across Astapor's meandering river. She closed her eyes for a moment, to imagine how it would look: all flowing black silk, and on it the red three-headed dragon of Targaryen, breathing golden flames. *A banner such as Rhaegar might have borne.* The river's banks were strangely tranquil. The Worm, the Astapori called the stream. It was wide and slow and crooked, dotted with tiny wooded islands. She glimpsed children playing on one of them, darting among elegant marble statues. On another island two lovers

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kissed in the shade of tall green trees, with no more shame than Dothraki at a wedding. Without clothing, she could not tell if they were slave or free.

The Plaza of Pride with its great bronze harpy was too confined a space to hold all the Unsullied she had bought. Instead they had been assembled in the Plaza of Punishment, fronting on Astapor's main gate, so they might be marched directly from the city once Daenerys had taken them in hand. There were no bronze statues here; only a great wooden platform where rebellious slaves were racked, and flayed, and hanged. "The Good Masters place them so they will be the first thing a new slave sees upon entering the city," Missandei told her as they came to the plaza.

At first glimpse, Dany thought for a moment that their skin was striped like the zorses of the Jogos Nhai. Then she rode her silver nearer and saw the raw red flesh beneath the crawling black stripes. *Flies. Flies and maggots.* The rebellious slaves had been peeled as a man might peel an apple, in a long curling strip. One man had an arm black with flies from fingers to elbow, and red and white beneath. Dany reined in beneath him. "What did this one do?" she demanded of Missandei.

"He raised a hand against his owner."

Her stomach roiling, Dany wheeled her silver about and trotted toward the center of the plaza, and the army she had bought so dear. Rank on rank on rank they stood, her stone halfmen with their hearts of brick; eight thousand and six hundred in the spiked bronze caps of fully trained Unsullied, and five thousand odd behind them, bareheaded, yet armed with spears and short swords. The ones furthest to the back were only boys, she saw, but they stood as straight and still as all the rest.

Kraznys mo Nakloz and his fellows were all there to greet her. Other well-born Astapori stood in knots behind them, sipping wine from silver flutes as slaves circulated among them with trays of olives and cherries and figs. The elder Grazdan sat in a sedan chair supported by four huge copper-skinned slaves. Half a dozen mounted lancers rode along the edges of the plaza, keeping back the crowds who had come to watch. The sun flashed blinding bright off the polished copper disks sewn to their cloaks, but she could not help but notice how nervous their horses seemed. *They fear the dragons. And well they ought.*

Kraznys had a slave help her down from her saddle. His own hands were full; one clutched his *tokar,* while the other held an ornate whip. "Here they are." He looked at Missandei. "Tell her they are hers . . . if she can pay."

"She can," the girl said.

Ser Jorah barked a command, and the trade goods were brought forward. Six bales of tiger skin, three hundred bolts of fine soft silk. Jars of saffron, jars of myrrh, jars of pepper and curry and cardamom, an onyx mask, twelve jade monkeys, casks of ink in red and black and green, a box of rare black amethysts, a box of pearls, a cask of pitted olives stuffed with maggots, a dozen casks of pickled cave fish, a great brass gong and a hammer to beat it with, seventeen ivory eyes, and a huge chest full of books written in tongues that Dany could not read. And more, and more, and more. Her people stacked it all before the slavers.

While the payment was being made, Kraznys mo Nakloz favored her with a few final words of counsel on the handling of her troops. "They are green as yet," he said through Missandei. "Tell the whore of Westeros she would be wise to blood them early. There are many small cities between here and there, cities ripe for sacking. Whatever plunder she takes will be hers alone.

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Unsullied have no lust for golds or gems. And should she take captives, a few guards will suffice to march them back to Astapor. We'll buy the healthy ones, and for a good price. And who knows? In ten years, some of the boys she sends us may be Unsullied in their turn. Thus all shall prosper."

Finally there were no more trade goods to add to the pile. Her Dothraki mounted their horses once more, and Dany said, "This was all we could carry. The rest awaits you on the ships, a great quantity of amber and wine and black rice. And you have the ships themselves. So all that remains is . . ."

". . . the dragon," finished the Grazdan with the spiked beard, who spoke the Common Tongue so thickly.

"And here he waits." Ser Jorah and Belwas walked beside her to the litter, where Drogon and his brothers lay basking in the sun. Jhiqui unfastened one end of the chain, and handed it down to her. When she gave a yank, the black dragon raised his head, hissing, and unfolded wings of night and scarlet. Kraznys mo Nakloz smiled broadly as their shadow fell across him.

Dany handed the slaver the end of Drogon's chain. In return he presented her with the whip. The handle was black dragonbone, elaboratly carved and inlaid with gold. Nine long thin leather lashes trailed from it, each one tipped by a gilded claw. The gold pommel was a woman's head, with pointed ivory teeth. "The harpy's fingers," Kraznys named the scourge.

Dany turned the whip in her hand. *Such a light thing, to bear such weight.* "Is it done, then? Do they belong to me?"

"It is done," he agreed, giving the chain a sharp pull to bring Drogon down from the litter.

Dany mounted her silver. She could feel her heart thumping in her chest. She felt desperately afraid. *Was this what my brother would have done?* She wondered if Prince Rhaegar had been this anxious when he saw the Usurper's host formed up across the Trident with all their banners floating on the wind.

She stood in her stirrups and raised the harpy's fingers above her head for all the Unsullied to see. *"It is done!"* she cried at the top of her lungs. *"You are mine!"* She gave the mare her heels and galloped up and down before the first rank, holding the fingers high. *"You are the dragon's now! You're bought and paid for! It is done! It is done!"*

She glimpsed old Grazdan turn his grey head sharply. *He hears me speak Valyrian.* The other slavers were not listening. They crowded around Kraznys and the dragon, shouting advice. Though the Astapori yanked and tugged, Drogon would not budge off the litter. Smoke rose grey from his open jaws, and his long neck curled and straightened as he snapped at the slaver's face.

It is time to cross the Trident, Dany thought, as she wheeled and rode her silver back. Her bloodriders moved in close around her. "You are in difficulty," she observed.

"He will not come," Kraznys said.

"There is a reason. A dragon is no slave." And Dany swept the lash down as hard as she could across the slaver's face. Kraznys screamed and staggered back, the blood running red down his cheeks into his perfumed beard. The harpy's fingers had torn his features half to pieces with one slash, but she did not pause to contemplate the ruin. "Drogon," she sang out loudly, sweetly, all her fear forgotten. *"Dracarys."*

The black dragon spread his wings and roared.

A lance of swirling dark flame took Kraznys full in the face. His eyes

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melted and ran down his cheeks, and the oil in his hair and beard burst so fiercely into fire that for an instant the slaver wore a burning crown twice as tall as his head. The sudden stench of charred meat overwhelmed even his perfume, and his wail seemed to drown all other sound.

Then the Plaza of Punishment blew apart into blood and chaos. The Good Masters were shrieking, stumbling, shoving one another aside and tripping over the fringes of their *tokars* in their haste. Drogon flew almost lazily at Kraznys, black wings beating. As he gave the slaver another taste of fire, Irri and Jhiqui unchained Viserion and Rhaegal, and suddenly there were three dragons in the air. When Dany turned to look, a third of Astapor's proud demon-horned warriors were fighting to stay atop their terrified mounts, and another third were fleeing in a bright blaze of shiny copper. One man kept his saddle long enough to draw a sword, but Jhogo's whip coiled about his neck and cut off his shout. Another lost a hand to Rakharo's *arakh* and rode off reeling and spurting blood. Aggo sat calmly notching arrows to his bowstring and sending them at *tokars*. Silver, gold, or plain, he cared nothing for the fringe. Strong Belwas had his *arakh* out as well, and he spun it as he charged.

"*Spears!*" Dany heard one Astapori shout. It was Grazdan, old Grazdan in his *tokar* heavy with pearls. "*Unsullied!* Defend us, stop them, defend your masters! Spears! Swords!"

When Aggo put an arrow through his mouth, the slaves holding his sedan chair broke and ran, dumping him unceremoniously on the ground. The old man crawled to the first rank of eunuchs, his blood pooling on the bricks. The Unsullied did not so much as look down to watch him die. Rank on rank on rank, they stood.

And did not move. *The gods have heard my prayer.*

"*Unsullied!*" Dany galloped before them, her silver-gold braid flying behind her, her bell chiming with every stride. "Slay the Good Masters, slay the soldiers, slay every man who wears a *tokar* or holds a whip, but harm no child under twelve, and strike the chains off every slave you see." She raised the harpy's fingers in the air . . . and then she flung the scourge aside. "*Freedom!*" she sang out. "*Dracarys! Dracarys!*"

"*Dracarys!*" they shouted back, the sweetest word she'd ever heard. "*Dracarys! Dracarys!*" And all around them slavers ran and sobbed and begged and died, and the dusty air was filled with spears and fire. ○

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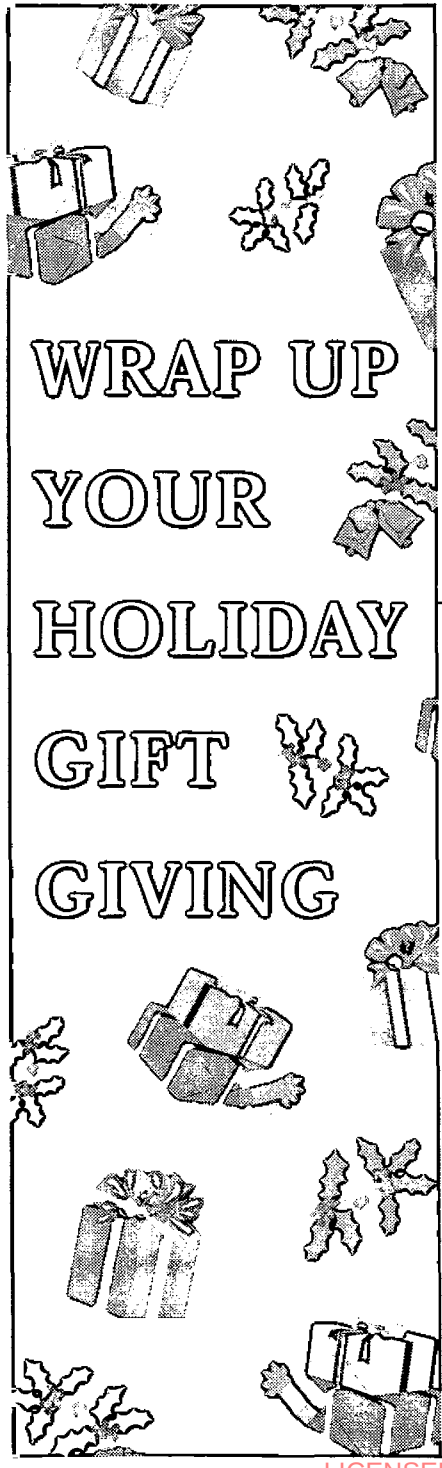

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ON BOOKS

Paul Di Filippo

Herding Cats

We live in revolutionary times. Tides of change sweep over all fields, including that of publishing. Sometimes diminishing our prospects, sometimes enlarging them, technological advances always mean that old ways morph strangely. One of the more heartening publishing innovations to appear lately is the concept of "print on demand," a process that encourages the instant availability of formerly out-of-print classics. Science fiction author John Betancourt has determined that his Wildside Press (PO Box 45, Gillette, NJ 07933, or <*www.wildsidepress.com*>) will be one of the ventures to pioneer this process, and he has brought into renewed being many worthy older books (and a few originals), all in handsome trade paperback format. Consider this partial catalog: from neglected British author Keith Roberts, *The Furies* ($15.00, 192 pages, ISBN 1-880448-85-8), *Kiteworld* ($15.00, 288 pages, ISBN 1-880448-87-4), and *The Grain Kings* ($15.00, 208 pages, ISBN 1-880448-84-X); *Windows on the Imagination* ($16.00, 208 pages, ISBN 1-880448-60-2), "Essays on Fantastic Literature" by Darrell Schweitzer; *Lafferty in Orbit* ($15.00, 220 pages, ISBN 1-880448-68-8), all of R.A. Lafferty's pieces from Knight's *Orbit* anthologies; Alan Dean Foster's *To the Vanishing Point* ($17.00, 310 pages, ISBN 1-58715-45-X); two by Mike Resnick, *A Safari of the Mind* ($15.00, 194 pages, ISBN 1-58715-007-7) and, with the editorial help of Patrick Nielsen Hayden, *Alternate Skiffy* ($12.50, 123 pages, ISBN 1-880448-54-8), featuring the stefnal unchronias of over a dozen authors; Lin Carter's *The Man Who Loved Mars* ($14.00, 157 pages, ISBN 1-58715-030-1); and finally, let us not forget Betancourt's own *Rememory* ($14.00, 197 pages, ISBN 1-58715-020-4). This enterprise is a win-win-win deal for publisher, reader and author alike, and deserves your support.

Reprinted the old-fashioned way, James Blish's omnibus *Cities in Flight* (Overlook, hardcover, $35.00, 591 pages, ISBN 1-58567-008-1) remedies a severe lack. This classic quartet of novels, so fundamental in the development of cosmological SF, deserves to be perpetually in print. Sporting a new endorsement by Stephen Baxter, whose own work flows out of Blish's, this volume offers plenty of reading value for your money. If you haven't yet traveled the galaxy with Blish's spindizzy-powered cities, you have a marvelous journey awaiting you. (Overlook Press, 386 West Broadway, NY, NY 10012.)

Making only its second hardback appearance, Fritz Leiber's *The Big Time* (Tor, hardcover, $21.95, 128 pages, ISBN 0-312-89079-6) continues to astound. The famous one-set construction of this tale from the Change Wars twixt Spiders and Snakes forces all its thrilling events into intense compression. And the world-weary narrative voice of "party girl" Greta Forzane testifies once more to Leiber's deft hand at depicting sexy career gals.

The last of our revivals is an item

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from cyberpunk's glorious dawn, John Shirley's *Eclipse* (Babbage Press, trade, $17.95, 326 pages, ISBN 1-930235-00-3). Originally published in 1985, this first volume of "A Song Called Youth" has been masterfully rechanneled and regrooved for the new millennium while retaining Shirley's ever-present effervescence. Like Wildside, Babbage Press—8740 Penfield Avenue, Northridge, CA 91324, or <*www.babbagepress.com*>—plans an extensive line of reprints and originals, but will flourish only with your patronage.

Cecilia Tan's Circlet Press (1770 Massachusetts Avenue, #278, Cambridge, MA 02140) specializes in melding erotica and the literature of the fantastic. Three new volumes boldly embody this vision. *Fetish Fantastic* (trade, $14.95, 181 pages, ISBN 1-885865-13-9) concentrates on certain esoteric desires in science-fictional milieus. My favorite piece was Raven Kaldera's "Thief of Dreams," detailing the intersection of virtual reality and revengeful lust, but the other ten entries are carnally satisfactory as well. The theme in *Sexcrime* (trade, $14.95, 204 pages, ISBN 1-885865-26-0) is one of conflicts between lust and authority. Twelve writers ingeniously imagine prohibitions against a variety of practices, then gleefully circumvent them. Jean Marie Stine's "Amaeru" offers linguistic kicks as well, and "Nudes Ascending a Staircase" by Renee Charles hits neo-Victorian highnotes. But surely my pick as the prize publication from Circlet to date must be Francesca Lia Block's daisy-chained novel, *Nymph* (hardcover, $16.95, 128 pages, ISBN 1-885865-30-9). The advent of a sexy mermaid in the first chapter sets off a cascade of eroticism in the lives of a loosely linked group of urban characters. An actor, a fashion designer, a psychiatrist, a nurse, a singer—all experience the redemptive powers of supranormal sex, much in the manner of a story by the Hernandez Brothers. Recommended for dull nights alone, or charged nights with a friend.

Thanks to editor Bobbi Sinha-Morey of Dark Regions Press (PO Box 6301, Concord, CA 94524) we can all experience the shadowy frissons of Charlee Jacob's selected poetry in *Flowers from a Dark Star* (chapbook, $5.95, 55 pages, ISBN 1-888993-18-9). Alternating lush narrative poems on Arabian themes with stefnal musings, Jacobs proves herself a cunning wordsmith. The poem that tickled me the most was "How Moses Brought Forth the Law," which postulates a spacetime rift that allows the prophet to secure his tablets from a most unusual source. Evocative drawings by Margaret Simon complete this handsome entry in an ongoing series.

Firebird Distributing (2030 First Street, Unit 5, Eureka, CA 95501, or <*www.firebirddistributing.com*>) continues to provide easy access to smashing UK imports. Here's a trio of recent ones, all from Enigmatic Press. William Meikle (with assistance on one story from Graeme Hurry) ushers us into a *Millennium Macabre* (chapbook, $10.00, 66 pages, ISSN 1464-1461). Three effective shockers evoke comparisons to August Derleth ("The Dark Island"), Ian Watson ("The Blue Hag"), and HPL his own bad self ("The Johnson Amulet"). A ghoulish grab-bag. A sense of mingled tradition and exploration pervades the anthology *Enigmatic Tales 7* (trade, $8.00, 148 pages, ISSN 1462-9062), edited by L. H. Maynard and M. P. N. Sims. Two classic reprints—"The Patch" by Philip Murray and "The Wardrobe" by A. M. Burrage—serve as foil to the sixteen fresh and well-wrought horror stories here, my fa-

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vorite of which is Rhys Hughes's "Nothing More Common," a Lafferty-esque tale of ghosts. Finally, *Icarus Descending* (trade, $13.00, 78 pages, ISBN 0-9537476-0-3) showcases two longish, stylish stories by Steve Savile, both of which riff fruitfully on memory, duty, love, and death.

What better way to commemorate the (debatable) beginning of a fresh millennium than to found a new SF magazine? Ambitious editor/publisher Paul Fraser (*<www.spectrumpublishing.com>*, or PO Box 10308, Aberdeen, AB11 6ZR, UK) has taken up this particular literary gauntlet with his *Spectrum SF* (bimonthly, £3.99, 160 pages, ISSN 1468-3903), and with two issues out so far, he's done immense credit to himself and the field. His choices have been impeccable, if necessarily slanted toward UK writers, and bode well for future issues. Beside featuring such authors as Stephen Baxter, Keith Brooke, Eric Brown, Garry Kilworth, and Alastair Reynolds, the first two numbers have partially serialized a novel by Keith Roberts, "Drek Yarman," set in Roberts's *Kiteworld* (1985) venue. Roberts's tale, a grim blend of Dickens and Robert Louis Stevenson in a postapocalyptic setting, is easily worth the price of admission. But the other stories of varying lengths are all equally alluring. My two favorites are Charles Stross's van-Vogtian "Bear Trap," about lethal stock portfolios, and Barrington Bayley's Dunsanyian "The Sky Tower," an affecting allegory of the hard process of living. With handsomely demure production values and a sure hand at the helm, *Spectrum SF* is the most impressive magazine debut since the lamented *SF Age*.

Cartoonist/animator Bill Plympton has taken his detailed and copious B&W storyboards for an upcoming film and shared them with us in *Mutant Aliens* (NBM, trade, $10.95, 188 pages, ISBN 1-56163-236-8). This typically wacked tale about a lost early NASA explorer and his unexpected decades-delayed return with a flock of bizarre aliens who make Pokémon characters look staid combines anarchy and morality in perfect ratio, much like classic Robert Sheckley. Plympton's jittery, unique artwork bespeaks a melange of the styles of Bill Rotsler, Peter Max, and Hieronymous Bosch. Order this supremely silly graphic novel from NBM, 555 8th Avenue, Suite 1202, NY, NY 10018.

With over nine thousand info-dense entries, copiously illustrated and exhaustively cross-referenced, R. G. Young's *The Encyclopedia of Fantastic Film* (Applause, trade, $39.95, 1016 pages, ISBN 1-55783-269-2) belongs on the shelf of any serious cineaste. The index by artist alone repays endless browsing. Wouldn't you like to track down every single weird film John Agar acted in? Contact Applause Books at 1841 Broadway, NY, NY 10023.

At age seventy-three, Daniel Keyes, famed author of *Flowers for Algernon* (1966), still retains his flair for telling a good story. But this time the subject is himself. In *Algernon, Charlie and I* (Challenge Press Books, hardcover, $24.95, 223 pages, ISBN 1-929519-00-1), Keyes gives us an autobiography centered around the genesis of his writerly ambitions and of his most famous tale. In quietly punchy prose he details a well-lived life whose broad outlines remind me of Jack Williamson's: a bright untutored youth becomes a writer and academic after broad real-world experiences through sheer willpower and talent. Filled with humorous and touching anecdotes, this book is a generous window onto one writer's soul. (Challenge Press Books, 3601 N. Dixie Hwy., Suite 7, PO Box 7148, Boca Raton, FL 33431.)

With tipped-in color plates, auto-

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graphed frontispiece, creamy stock and decorative embellishments, the limited edition (600 copies only) of *Imagination Fully Dilated II* (IFD, hardcover, $75.00, 570 pages, ISBN 0-9671912-1-1) is a lavish specimen of the bookmaker's art. It also happens to be a rousing gigundo anthology of top-notch fiction, all centered around the artwork of the talented Alan Clark. Thirty writers have come together under the editorship of Elizabeth Engstrom to fashion tales using Clark's accomplished, spooky, funny paintings as springboards, much in the manner of the Ellison-Yerka collaboration, *Mind Fields* (1994). The results include fantasy, SF, horror, and near-mainstream pieces. The synergy between some stories and their inspirational images is tighter than others, but there's not a failure among the bunch. It's hard to pick favorites, but I'll cite Ray Vukcevich's "Fancy Pants," a kind of David-Bunch-like robot tale; Poppy Brite's "The Devil You Know," involving a cat who enters the Mardi Gras; Jeff VanderMeer's "Ghost Dancing with Manco Tupac," featuring Incan tales within tales; and F. Paul Wilson's "Anna," about a murder victim's long-delayed eerie revenge. This collectible anthology will amply repay your investment with literary and esthetic pleasures. (IFD, PO Box 40776, Eugene, OR 97404.)

In Through the Out Door

Stephen Baxter has built a career to envy. From his first short-story publication in 1987, he has prolifically delivered over a dozen books destined, many feel, to become future classics of the field. Baxter's latest, *Manifold: Time* (DelRey, hardcover, $24.00, 440 pages, ISBN 0-345-43075-1), is the first book in a trilogy, yet the climax of this volume raises the bar in the Hard SF Olympics. Skip this spoiler sentence, if you wish: Baxter literally destroys our entire universe at the close of this installment, a showstopper move that a writer from an elder generation, James Blish, reserved for the ending of a quartet of books.

Baxter's ambitions are also evident in his multitasking, multifaceted approach to his story. He initiates a half-dozen thematic threads from page one, then chooses to fracture his point-of-view into scores of character-specific labeled sections. Amazingly, this scattershot method works, despite a relative ponderousness of liftoff, which occurs about halfway through the book. After that, the novel is like being caught in the backwash of one of Baxter's beloved Saturn rockets.

The year 2010 is plagued by a number of problems: a devastated ecology, a spate of mysterious mutant births, political instability, a somnolent space program, and a spreading mass neurosis engendered by scientific apocalyptic predictions of disputed accuracy. Reid Malenfant, our monstrously egocentric hero, seems determined to battle all these ills single-handedly. His main goal is to return mankind to space on the cheap, but he soon finds that his simple industrial dreams dovetail with a cosmic agenda involving the fate of the entire "manifold," the set of all possible universes.

Malenfant is an unapologetic megalomaniac with a heart of gold. Not surprisingly, his closest friends —ex-wife Emma, Yoda-like associate Cornelius Taine, and child-savant Michael—end up suffering the deadly fallout of his wild-eyed singlemindedness on an incredible voyage through time and space. Baxter's Malenfant might be an ironic comment on such similar icons as

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Heinlein's D.D. Harriman. Certainly Baxter is well acquainted with the history of science fiction, and not averse to homages. His mutant children recall dozens of famous predecessors from the work of Stapledon, Wyndham, and Kuttner, among others. A phrase like "black hole engineers" is pure thirties-vintage Jack Williamson or John W. Campbell. The alien artifact that gives ingress to the manifold harks back to Clarke's famous monolith. And Poul Anderson is referenced explicitly in "The Flying Mountain Society."

Baxter does not quite rise to the sheer poetry of a Benford or the massive ontological weirdness of a Greg Egan, but he claims enough of both qualities to cumulatively astound. This series may well establish Baxter as the Hard SF demiurge to beat.

Art for the Massives

Lyricism, mythology, a semi-decadent impressionism. One might very well argue that these three areas are hardly ventured into by today's SF. 'Twas not always so. Once, when innovative giants such as Roger Zelazny walked the earth, SF explored a larger emotional terrain than it now chooses to inhabit. Sometimes it seems only Richard Calder upholds what might be termed a New Wave ethos reengineered for the twenty-first century.

With the publication last year of Jan Lars Jensen's superb *Shiva 3000,* however, a pendulum seems to have started its return swing. Jensen's book harked zestfully back to Zelazny's *Lord of Light* (1967), replete with monkey-gods and Oriental bijouterie. Now arrives Scott Westerfeld's *Evolution's Darling* (Four Walls Eight Windows, trade, $15.95, 290 pages, ISBN 1-56858-149-1), a postmodern space opera of sorts that might stand to Delany's *Nova* (1968) as Jensen's book did to Zelazny's.

Across a galaxy-wide culture (which we see in tantalizing bits and pieces only as the roving spotlight of Westerfeld's leisurely plot allows), a small ship carries a father and daughter and their AI pilot hither and yon on the father's freelance information-gathering missions (echoes of both Shakespeare's *The Tempest* [1611] and its silly putty copy *Forbidden Planet* [1956] are not misheard here). The lonely daughter, Rathere, conspires with the AI, whom she calls Darling, to elevate its sentience above the Turing barrier that prevents it from being a sovereign individual. After some travail, girl and machine succeed. Flashforward two centuries, and Darling, incarnated in strange totipotent form, has become a roving agent for art galleries and museums. His current mission is to track down the legacy of a supposedly dead artist, a fellow artificial being named Vaddum.

On the slagged-over planet Malvir, Darling's path crosses that of Mira, a deadly representative of the AI gods (to label them with Simon Ings's handy term, Massives) who tweak the galactic culture as they please. A wholesomely perverted love affair develops between fleshy Mira and cybernetic Darling, during which they work through bizarre emotions and memories. The opposed goals of their missions reach a surprising culmination, and our story concludes with no regimes overturned or empires toppled.

Westerfeld's lazily meandering tale moves forward in short, compactified sections of precise and somewhat cold prose, lending his story the feel of one of Cordwainer Smith's tales-told-at-long-remove. Merging the allusiveness of Jean Mark Gawron with the grittiness of William Barton, Westerfeld suc-

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ceeds in fashioning a unique myth of the far future, where science, poetry, and eroticism bleed together in a "black market of thoughts and feelings." This book offers a welcome change from all technocratic visions, and should top award lists in 2001.

A Condition of Becoming

In 1963 Brian Aldiss published a poem titled "There Are No More Good Stories About Mars Because We Need No More Good Stories About Mars." Well, a man's allowed to change his mind at least once over the course of nearly four decades, and this year sees SFWA's newest Grandmaster deliver to us *White Mars* (St. Martins, hardcover, $23.95, 323 pages, ISBN 0-312-25473-3). Aldiss's collaborator on this utopian novel—subtitled "The Mind Set Free"—is noted mathematical physicist Roger Penrose, and consequently the science quotient here is higher than with any previous Aldiss book. Nonetheless, Aldiss's trademark optimistically melancholic view of life still comes through bracingly intact.

In the decade of the 2040s, a Mars colony is finally firmly established. Twenty years pass, and Earth experiences a major financial collapse that cuts the colony off from the mother planet. The six thousand Martians blink once or twice and then, with remarkable unanimity (a few dissenters are quickly quelled), they decide to set about establishing a rational society dedicated to maximum freedom, the full realization of human potential and universal sanity. In short, a utopia, one intimately conditioned by the strange surroundings, an environment that rewards cooperation more than competition.

Utopian novels traditionally require large swatches of lecturing to substantiate their portrait of a world transformed, and *White Mars* is no exception. To give Aldiss and Penrose full credit, they strive to embody their lessons in vivid characters. But the main four—Tom Jeffries, a Thomas Jefferson analogue; Cang Hai, a young earthy woman of cloned birth; and two scientific geniuses, Dreiser Hawkwood and Kathi Skadmorr—all tend to speak in interchangeably lofty terms. By the time we get the same physics lecture twice from separate characters in Chapter 11, any pretense at naturalism has worn thin.

Yet this "defect" is simply any good utopia's default mode. We are here for the ideas, and our authors provide a heaping portion of stimulating hypotheses and proposals concerning all the major areas of human existence: education, birth, work, art, sex. Their biggest shocker involves the exact nature of the gigantic mountain called Olympus Mons, and I can guarantee you'll be surprised.

In two short concluding chapters, the authors extend their fledgling utopia—surprisingly missionary in nature—forward by a century or so, painting a picture of a humanity "at last become REASONABLE." But there are no ends to growth or striving for perfection, for as Tom Jeffries earlier observes, "Utopia [is] a condition of becoming, a glow in the distance, a journey for which human limitations precluded an end."

Aldiss and Penrose have inched us fractionally closer to this bright beacon.

Forty Years of the Rat

Harry Harrison's interstellar conman James Bolivar diGriz made his first book appearance in *The Stainless Steel Rat* during that long ago year 1961. I myself first encountered the charming Slippery Jim ten

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years later, in a paperback reprint graced with a fine Powers cover. I eagerly snatched up the next two—*The Stainless Steel Rat's Revenge* (1970) and *The Stainless Steel Rat Saves the World* (1972)—enjoying these humorous criminal exploits in the same way I enjoyed Keith Laumer's Retief and Ron Goulart's Chameleon Corps series. But somehow I lost track of Harrison's intergalactic rogue afterward. Curious to see what diGriz was up to some four decades after his birth (surely Harrison is nearing some kind of series longevity record here), I picked up the latest: *The Stainless Steel Rat Joins the Circus* (Tor, hardcover, $23.95, 269 pages, ISBN 0-312-86934-7/Gollancz, hardcover, £16.99, 269 pages, ISBN 0-575-06866-3). I found an enjoyable, somewhat silly adventure, a jolly crime caper in the manner of Donald Westlake that allowed me to pass a nostalgic few hours pleasantly. But inevitably, diGriz has aged, perhaps past the point of sustainability, and both Harrison and his protagonists seemed overtly disinclined to continue much further.

Formerly the classic loner, Jim has long ago married and sired two sons, now adults. The whole family is swept up in the machinations of a sleazy fellow named Kaizi, who purports to be the richest man in the universe, but who is really a conman nearly the equal of the Rat. Undertaking a mission to the police-state world Fetorscorria, the diGrizes soon find themselves hunted and threatened by the authorities, forced to practice their elaborate scams for Kaizi. Eventually, of course, all the complications are sorted out (although the climactic crisis involves the shameless last-minute introduction of an unforeshadowed character), and the Rat and family disappear into theoretical happy retirement.

The parody and comedy in this volume fall short of Harrison's past accomplishments, and seem a tad dated. I wonder whether jokes such as a plastic explosive named "Playtexx" will register with a new generation of readers. The stefnal bits are negligible gimmicks—robots that need kicking, and so forth—although I did enjoy a living mask that regularly demands to be fed chicken soup. In short, the gray around this Rat's whiskers argues that Harrison's considerable talents might best be turned elsewhere.

Eugene-ics

Brian Dobson has a small problem. He's a low-rent private investigator with a unique handicap. Brian shuttles his identity among several multiple personalities. There's Skylight Howells, his main gumshoe persona, in whose name the agency functions. There's the resourceful Lulu, Brian's feminine side. Tag, the "Average Guy," is good at blending into crowds. Scarface is the muscleman, with an affection for tropical fish. Dieter has an unfortunate obsession with culinary matters. Dennis is a hacker.

I *think* I've got all the many facets of Brian Dobson down on paper. But after reading Ray Vukcevich's *The Man of Maybe Half-A-Dozen Faces* (St. Martin's, hardcover, $22.95, 245 pages, ISBN 0-312-24652-8), I'm so pleasantly befuddled and trippy-feeling I can't swear to any accuracy.

This first novel by an author known to the SF community as a fine short-story writer concerns a few crazy weeks in Brian's life as he strives to discover who is killing the "bad documentalists" on the Eugene, Oregon, computer scene and also whether his quondam highschool antagonist, Frank Wallace, is cheating on his wife. Frank's a cop, by the

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way, and resents Brian's snooping. Oh, yes—did I mention Brian's semi-secret addiction? He's a problem tap-dancer, frequenting illicit tap-dance bars and worrying about his dereliction from his support group.

Narrated in a hypnotically goofy first-person voice, this book offers many a laugh and not a little sad irony. Vukcevich, through Brian, has a way of spinning offbeat metaphors that yet manage to convey something real and essential about the trials of life that even "normal" people undergo. Besides weaving the threads of a valid mystery into a satisfying whole, Vukcevich succeeds in building real empathy for his far-from-average hero.

This book will garner inevitable comparisons to Jonathan Lethem's *Motherless Brooklyn* (1999), but Vukcevich can hold his head up proudly in such fine company. Philip José Farmer's *Nothing Burns in Hell* (1998) is another lofty benchmark that this book proudly matches.

Go read this book—or do you need to hear from me about the whole DATAPANTS angle as well?

An Op in the Night

Alternate histories, so much in vogue of late, have reached some kind of ingenious comical apex with a trio of novels from master satirist Ron Goulart. Envisioning a timeline in which famed comedian Groucho Marx moonlighted as a detective, the craftsmanly Goulart has created interstitial adventures that, while they do not employ fantastic devices, nonetheless are skewed from reality just enough to be of associational interest to SF readers. Of course, these books also boast the virtues of being exciting, funny, and even touching as well.

The first volume, *Groucho Marx, Master Detective* (1998) finds Groucho embarking on a new radio show of the same name. His scriptwriter, Frank Denby, serves as the chronicler of this adventure and subsequent ones. Frank's love interest and, in sequential volumes, his wife, cartoonist Jane Danner, rounds out the sleuthing team. The first mystery concerns the death of a young actress whom Groucho had once befriended, and provides the personal impetus for Groucho and Frank's detour from entertainers to investigators. In *Groucho Marx, Private Eye* (1999), the frame-up of another female friend offers a similar motivation. However, by the third volume, *Elementary, My Dear Groucho* (St. Martin's, hardcover, $23.95, 261 pages, ISBN 0-312-20892-8), Frank and the wisecracking star of *A Night at the Opera* (1935) are tackling the murder of a Hollywood director just for the sheer challenge of it.

Goulart has done a number of smart things here. He's set his mysteries in the years 1937-38, a point where Groucho was down on his luck and had free time. He's mixed real Hollywood personalities with imaginary ones to recreate the seamless texture of a vanished Tinseltown era while allowing subtle parody as well. In Frank and Jane, whose banter evokes Nick and Nora Charles, he's come up with engaging supporting characters whose relationship actually evolves. And he's kept up a number of running jokes from book to book, such as Groucho's disdain for autograph seekers and the appearance of a bloodhound named Dorgan.

But such a series will rise or fall on the central character, and I'm happy to report that Goulart's Groucho rings authentically to me. Goulart has gleefully captured the comedian's rich verbal hijinx, inserting a few well-known lines into many invented Perelmanesque riffs of high caliber. By the end of the third in-

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stallment, when Groucho experiences a chilling premonition of the Holocaust, we fully empathize with his fictional reality.

Of course, the only way fully to encourage you to read these charming mysteries is to remind you that outside of a dog, a book is man's best friend—and inside of a dog, it's too dark to read!

The Short End of the Styx

The Silver Era of single-author collections continues apace, with publishers both big and small gifting us with a slew of wonderful treasuries.

No longer will the aficionado of the gleefully deranged stories of Rudy Rucker have to search long and hard for his two rare early collections, *The Fifty-Seventh Franz Kafka* (1983) and *Transreal!* (1991). In *Gnarl!* (Four Walls Eight Windows, hardcover, $35.00, 566 pages, ISBN 1-56858-159-9), the majority of Rucker's short fiction is elegantly presented, including a heretofore unpublished piece written with Marc Laidlaw, "The Andy Warhol Sandcandle," which tracks the crosstemporal influence of the great Pop artist on two colorful street people. Whether following the antic exploits of surfers, inventors, mathematicians, professors, stoners, or robots, Rucker brings to his tales compassion, ingenuity, and a sense of wonder colored with a healthy irreverence. This book should form an essential part of any SF library.

Editor Paul Williams has wisely chosen to conclude Volume Six of Theodore Sturgeon's essential *Complete Stories* with *Baby Is Three* (North Atlantic Books, hardcover, $30.00, 424 pages, ISBN 1-55643-319-0). The publication of this novella about *homo gestalt* in the pages of *Galaxy* in 1952 catapulted Sturgeon to unprecedented heights, signaling the beginning of his long reign as arguably the most important SF writer of the next ten years. Later incorporated into *More Than Human* (1953), the superseded version of "Baby Is Three" reprinted here offers its own little-seen pleasures. Two other stories—"Excalibur and the Atom" and "Never Underestimate"—have never before reached the contents page of a Sturgeon collection. The former is a rather clunky PI-searches-for-the-Grail farrago, but the latter is a slippery, tasty bonbon about the battle of the sexes. As always, Williams's endnotes and loving editorial guidance add extra value to Sturgeon's heartfelt dramas. (North Atlantic Books, PO Box 12327, Berkeley, CA 94712.)

Leaping spectacularly into the completist arena, publisher Stephen Haffner (Haffner Press, 5005 Crooks Road, Suite 35, Royal Oak, MI 48073) has launched a comprehensive archive of Jack Williamson's lifetime-so-far short fiction output with a pair of gorgeous volumes. Judging by these first two massive books, reading through this whole series will be like taking a survey course in the entire history of modern SF. Williamson has done practically everything possible in the field, and a uniform edition of his work serves both as a tribute to its still-fertile author and as a boon to us lucky readers. The first volume, *The Metal Man and Others* (hardcover, $32.00, 538 pages, ISBN 1-893887-02-2), contains nine stories (some of which have previously been issued between covers as entire novels!) spanning the years 1928-1931. They reveal Williamson—in his own modest estimation naïve yet bubbling with ideas and fresh enthusiasms—still lingering narratively in the solar system, but hardly tentatively. These stories brim with crackle and zip and prescient inventions, including space

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habitats ("The Prince of Space"). Definitely a product of their era, these adventures nevertheless partake of the universal, offering early instances of SF tropes, venues, and idioms still extant. Volume Two, *Wolves of Darkness* (hardcover, $32.00, 529 pages, ISBN 1-893887-04-9) finds Williamson finally bursting into interstellar locales in "The Stone from the Green Star" and foreshadowing his masterfully Jungian *Darker Than You Think* (1948) in the title piece. Color reproductions of relevant magazine covers and plentiful appendixes add further value.

James Tiptree's active SF career lasted a not-inconsiderable twenty years, from her first sales in 1967 until her death by her own hand in 1987. Today, we are almost as far from the end of her career as the whole span of time her sales covered. Nevertheless, Alice Sheldon still looms portentously over the field. Along with Philip K. Dick, J.G. Ballard, and Samuel Delany—all figures whom she admired—she continues to stand as one of those writers around whom myths and legends congregate, her mundane life assuming as much relevance as her fictional output. Tiptree's legacy is well served by editor and longtime friend Jeff Smith, who supervised the publication of *Meet Me at Infinity* (Tor, hardcover, $25.95, 396 pages, ISBN 0-312-85874-4), a volume that collects ten previously ungathered stories (including her first sale, "The Lucky Ones," which appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1946) and all her published non-fiction. Although the stories are undeniably fascinating—including the goofy "Happiness is a Warm Spaceship," which Tiptree often needlessly denigrated—the essays bulk larger here, offering insights into the Human (Tiptree's capitalization) behind the woman behind the man behind the fiction. At one point Tiptree likens the history of SF to the construction of a huge cathedral by amateurs and professionals alike, some feverishly mad, some coolly sane, all laboring to glorify a God half-glimpsed. Among all us worshippers, Tiptree surely erected her own unmistakable spire, hollowed her own precious nave, and bricked up her own dank crypt.

A typically pyrotechnic cover by Rick Berry adorns Michael Swanwick's *Moon Dogs* (NESFA Press, hardcover, $25.00, 409 pages, ISBN 1-886778-22-1), the contents of which are commensurably prismatic. Well-received collaborative stories recognizable to *Asimov's* readership ("Ancestral Voices," "The City of God," both with Gardner Dozois) share space with less-familiar fictions (including two Avram Davidson-related fantasies) and some stimulating essays. My favorite item: "Ships," coauthored by Jack Dann, which out-Moorcocks Moorcock in its tale of an eternal war between angels and the damned. As always, Swanwick's prose blends erudition, empathy and action in equal portions, producing unforgettable stories that span a wide range of vital interests. (NESFA Press, PO Box 809, Framingham, MA 01701.) ○

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SF Conventional Calendar

There are a lot of conventions to go yet, as the autumn con season winds down. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs and on how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard. - Erwin S. Strauss

OCTOBER 2000

20–22—**MileHiCon.** For info, write: **Box 101322, Denver CO 80250.** Or phone: **(303) 657–5912** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). (E-mail) **lindanel@ix.netcom.com.** (Web) **eco–net.com/milehicon.** Con will be held in: Lakewood CO (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Sheraton. Guests will include: Ben Bova, S. & J. Robinson, C. Dean Andersson, Cacek.

20–22—**NecronomiCon.** (E-mail) **raggedyann@stonehill.org.** (Web) **stonehill.org.** Sabal Park Radisson, Tampa FL. Hogan.

20–22—**ConClave. (313) 454–1554.** (E-mail) **conclave@hamjudo.com.** (Web) **conclavesf.org.** Holiday Inn South, Lansing MI.

20–22—**TerraCon.** (E-mail) **terracon@iname.com.** (Web) **terracon.freeservers.com.** SeaTac Radisson, Seattle WA.

21–22—**Ireland Nat'l. Con.** (E-mail) **info@octocon.com.** (Web) **octocon.com.** Royal Dublin, Dublin Ireland.

26–29—**World Fantasy Con. (512) 835–9304.** (E-mail) **fduartejr@aol.com.** Omni, Corpus Christi TX. K. Jeter, J. Crowley.

26–31—**HanseCon. (049) 0 6949 4654.** (E-mail) **hra.hanse@freenet.de.** CVJM–Haus, Lübeck Germany. Relaxacon.

27–29—**InCon. (509) 924–9000.** (E-mail) **hrothgar@uswest.net.** (Web) **incon.skywalk.com.** Doubletree, Spokane WA. Dalmas.

27–29—**Ohio Valley Filk Fest. (614) 851–0936.** (E-mail) **ovff@aol.com.** Wyndham Dublin, Columbus OH. SF folksinging.

27–29—**NekoCon.** (E-mail) **nekocon@eskimo.com.** Holiday Inn, Chesapeake VA. DeJesus, Kurakowa, Brady, Lillis. Anime.

27–29—**Magna Cum Murder. (765) 285–8975.** (E-mail) **kennison@aol.com.** Roberts Hotel, Muncie IN. Mystery fiction.

27–30—**Cult TV. (01733) 205–009.** (E-mail) **culttvuk@geocities.com.** (Web) **cult–tv.freeserve.co.uk.** Pontins, Torquay UK.

28–29—**VulKon. (954) 441–8735.** (E-mail) **joemotes@aol.com.** Holiday Inn Strongsville, Cleveland OH. Commercial media.

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2–4—**Galileo, Danzigerstr. 13, Langelsheim 38685, Germany. (05326) 929–139.** (Web) **galileo7.de.** Maritim, Bremen. Trek.

3–5—**ConiFur Northwest, 2406 SW 308 Pl., Federal Way WA 98023.** (Web) **conifur.org.** Best Western, Fife WA. Furries.

4–5—**Wolf 359, Box 1419, Slough PDO SL2 5WJ, UK.** Park, Heathrow, London UK. Don S. Davis, Teryl Rothery. Media.

4–5—**Creation, 100 W. B'way #1200, Glendale CA 91210. (818) 409–0960.** Pacific Beach, Honolulu HI. Commercial Trek.

10–12—**WindyCon, Box 184, Palatine IL 60078.** (E-mail) **windycon@windycon.org.** Hyatt, Schaumburg (Chicago) IL.

10–12—**TusCon, Box 26822, Tucson AZ 85726. (520) 881–3709.** (E-mail) **basfa@azstarnet.com.** Executive Inn. C. Wells.

10–12—**NovaCon, 379 Myrtle Rd., Sheffield S2 3HQ, UK.** (E-mail) **pat@cooky.demon.co.uk.** Britannia, Birmingham UK.

10–12—**United Fan Con, 26 Darrell Dr., Randolph MA 02368. (781) 986–8735.** Marriott, Springfield MA. Trek/Dr. Who.

10–12—**TropiCon, Box 70143, Ft. Lauderdale FL 70143.** (E-mail) **tropicon@sfsfs.org.** Clarion, Hollywood FL. V. Vinge.

11–12—**Creation, 100 W. B'way #1200, Glendale CA 91210. (818) 409–0960.** Hyatt, Palo Alto CA. Commercial Herc/Xena.

17–19—**PhilCon, Box 8303, Philadelphia PA 19101. (215) 604–3980.** (E-mail) **info@philcon.org.** Adam's Mark. V. Vinge.

17–19—**OryCon, Box 5703, Portland OR 19101. (503) 774–1043.** (E-mail) **kristy@eloft.net. Doubletree.** Dalkey, J. Barnes.

17–19—**BeNeLuxCon, Mozartlaan 38, Voorschoten 2253 HX, Netherlands. contreaty@jimacred.demon.nl.** Maastricht.

17–19—**ExotiCon, Box 9431, Bridge City LA 70096. (504) 436–3378.** (E-mail) **bigrobis@bellsouth.net.** New Orleans LA.

18–19—**NE SuperCon, Box 266, Malverne NY 11565.** (E-mail) **director@supercon.org.** Farmingdale NY. M. Hatch. Media.

18–19—**VulKon, Box 297122, Pembroke Pines FL 33029. (954) 441–8735.** (E-mail) **joemotes@aol.com.** Orlando FL. Media.

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NEXT ISSUE

JANUARY COVER STORY

We kick off another great year of *Asimov's* stories next month with a big new novella by Hugo- and Nebula-winner **Allen Steele**, our January cover story, "Stealing Alabama." This one is a taut, suspenseful, edge-of-your-seat adventure that pits a ragtag group of conspirators against an oppressive and omnipresent de facto totalitarian regime in a troubled future America, where dissent is not allowed and those who are perceived as being enemies of the state disappear, never to be seen again. With spies everywhere, time running out, and the slightest mistake meaning instant death, can they possibly succeed in their mission to find freedom for themselves and their families . . . and, not at all incidentally, to claim the stars for humanity's future? To find out, you'll have to tune in next issue, for a hair-raising, widescreen thriller you won't want to miss!

OTHER TOP-FLIGHT WRITERS

Robert Reed, one of our most popular and prolific writers, returns with an intriguing and paradoxical look into a mysterious "Mirror," one that shows what *isn't* there as well as what *is*; hot new writer **Richard Wadholm**, whose "Green Tea" was one of our most acclaimed stories last year, takes us on a nostalgic but ominous trip to a vacation resort unlike any you've ever visited before, where time itself is fluid and mutable in *either* direction, and informs us that, if you look sharp, "From Here You Can See the Sunquists" . . . who turn out to be well worth watching!; busy and prolific writer **Kage Baker**, whose fourth novel has just been released, brings us another of her popular stories of the time-traveling Company, this one giving us an insight into the bizarre goings-on behind the headline "Studio Dick Dies Near Malibu"; **Steven Utley** offers us a shrewd demonstration of why "Half a Loaf" may be better then none . . . *maybe*; and **Lawrence Person** returns with a global primer for humanity as he helps us with "Getting Ready for Prime Time."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column takes a regretful look at "The Evaporation of Reputations"; and **Peter Heck** brings us "On Books"; and **James Patrick Kelly's** "On the Net" column plugs into "Cyberpunks"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, and other features. Look for our January issue on sale on your newsstand on November 21, 2000, or subscribe today (you can also subscribe online, at our *Asimov's* Internet website, at *http://www.asimovs.com*), and be sure that you miss none of the great stuff we have coming up for you the **rest** of the year!

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